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The Scalp King; or, The Human Thunderbolt.

BY CAPTAIN J. F. C. ADAMS,

AUTHOR OF "BUCK BUCKRAM," "LIGHTNING JOE," "OLD ZIP'S CABIN," ETC., ETC., ETC.



SWINGING ALOFT THE BLOOD DRIPPING SCALPS OF THE INDIAN GIRL AND HER LOVER, HE DASHED AT HEADLONG SPEED THROUGH THE VILLAGE.

The Scalp King;

OR,

The Human Thunderbolt.

A Tale of Border Vengeance.

BY CAPT. J. F. C. ADAMS,
AUTHOR OF "THE LOST HUNTERS," "LIGHT-
HOUSE LIGE," "LIGHTNING JOE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE OATH OF VENGEANCE.

"As long as heaven spares my life, just so long shall my hand be raised in deadly hate against the red-man. Here, on my bended knees, I swear to spare none within whose veins runs the least drop of Indian blood, man, woman or child—the gray-headed sire or helpless infancy. As they scalped those who were my all; as they—oh, mercy keep me from going mad—tore the silken hair from their heads even while pleading for mercy, so shall my heart become stone and never know anything of pity; so will I follow them by day and night, beneath the summer's sun and the winter's snow, in daylight and in darkness, in storm and calm—seeking all, sparing none, until for every hair that has fallen a scalp shall be torn and a red-blooded wretch sent howling into the arms of death. As I keep this oath, even so may God judge me when my own last hour shall come. But may it not be until I have been avenged as never yet man was—until rivers of blood and mountains of graves have partially satisfied my revenge against the wolves of the prairie."

Rarely, if ever, was a more beautiful home on the borders than that Roger Bennett had carved out of the wilderness for himself, just beyond the borders of civilization.

A poor man, but gifted with extreme energy, he had removed at a very early day from one of the sterile States that lie along the northeastern shores of our country, to the fruitfulness of the West, and invested his little all in the newly-surveyed Government lands, looking forward with perfect confidence to the time when the great wave of emigration should flow even beyond him and make his possessions valuable.

He was of the class of hardy pioneers whom no danger can daunt—to him the usual stories of Indian massacre were but idle words. With him to resolve was to accomplish, and he had never failed to carry out the end he had in view. The means he employed were those most convenient—the impulses those of the moment, and he very seldom stopped to calculate chances.

In the choice of a location he had displayed rare judgment. The land he had pre-empted was a mixture of prairie and timber, well watered and lying upon the direct line where iron bands would at no distant day connect the eastern and western shores—where the telegraphic nerve would thrill from ocean to ocean, busy hands erect cities and the sound of the church-going bell be heard, swelling over the as yet almost untrodden wilderness.

For two years he had remained unmolested by the Indians, although warned by the old trappers that such a state of affairs could not last—that tomahawk, and knife, and flame would some day be hurled against him, and in a single dark hour his loved ones be murdered and all his property swept away.

But as well might they have attempted to whistle down a tempest as to stir him in his firm resolutions. He had well calculated the chances before he made the venture, and that done he became as iron. So he toiled with the most commendable industry, raised a house that was indeed a wonder in that sparsely settled region, cleared up the forest, cultivated the prairie and coolly defied even the thought of calamity.

But as it is upon the ocean so also has it ever proved to be in an Indian country—that calm is but the rest that precedes the storm—and when he returned upon a sweet summer evening from an unusually lengthened journey, he found his beautiful home in ashes, his stock driven off, and a thousand-fold more than these, his wife and three little ones lying cold in death—wantonly, cruelly butchered—and scalped!

For a brief time he stood leaning against the tree to which he had reeled for support, motionless and dumb with the accumulated horrors. Then he drew his hand heavily over his eyes, walked nearer and looked upon the scene of utter desolation, gathered the brutally mangled

corpses around him, and kneeling down called God to witness the terrible oath of vengeance that escaped his lips—an oath that would be kept with the very last drop of his blood—with the very last blow of his death-stiffening hand!

A man of the most violent passions, he was yet not one to faint beneath the swift and fearful calamity that had overtaken him. The intense love that had been as life to him for so many years instantly curdled in his heart to gall, and every other feeling was swallowed up by and merged in a desire for revenge that was as boundless as the sea. Nothing else would satisfy the longings of his nature—nothing else cool the white heat of his temper.

So absorbed was he in this that he forgot, or at least neglected, for a time, the sad rites due to the dead—forgot that the forms of those he had idolized were lying unburied near—the sorrowing stars shining down upon four mangled corpses.

All through the long, bitter night he remained scarcely regarding and yet unconsciously keeping watch over them, with the wolves (that had scented the blood from afar) howling in the vicinity—sat brooding and planning revenge, and almost cursing the morning for long delaying its coming.

But the very first of dawn aroused him from his semi-stupor, and he stared wildly from one dear face to another, lifted each by turn, kissed the cold clay lips, and called upon them to witness (as he had done Heaven) the dedication of heart, brain and strength to a matchless vengeance.

Then, with a face wherein sorrow and stern purpose struggled for the mastery, he arose, sought and found the proper implements, and began digging a grave sufficiently large to entomb all.

To one of so muscular a frame it was not a difficult task, and yet the light had grown distinct before it was accomplished, and he commenced preparing the corpses (in the best manner his limited means permitted) for burial.

But even as he was doing so, the step of a horse caused him to pause, and glancing up hastily he saw a young physician who had recently settled in a neighboring town, and with whom he had formed an unusual intimacy, riding toward him.

"Hello!" shouted the visitor, as he was issuing from the woods. "Hello, Bennett, I'm most mighty glad I struck your clearing; have been wandering in the infernal woods all night and—Great God! what does this mean?"

He sprang from his tired horse, and stood aghast at the scene that was presented to him.

"Not a word, Guy Oliver!" was the stern answer. "I have fought against my heart for weary hours for fear of being unnerved, and now your tears will undo all. I must be a man!"

"Man? This is enough to cause one to forget all of humanity and become a fiend," and the young physician, familiar as he was with scenes of blood in hospitals and even upon a few battlefields, trembled like one of the maple-leaves in the fresh breeze of morning.

"And if I become one, who but God shall judge me?" was the pitiful question.

"Not I, my friend; and by my right hand, you shall not go alone upon the trail of vengeance. I have neither kith nor kin in the wide world, at least that I know of, and I loved your wife and—"

"For the love of Heaven, silence!"

The sufferings of the wifeless husband and childless father were terrible to even look upon, and with a wildly-beating heart Guy Oliver assisted him to arrange the corpses in their last resting-place—to cover with branches, and grass, and bark, to replace the earth and soil—to build a huge fire over them to keep the wolves from digging up the remains, feeling that if they were not soon hidden from sight Roger Bennett would become a maniac.

Not a single word was spoken until all was finished and they had turned away and were about to enter the woods. Then the bereaved man paused, as if for a last look, and said, in a husky voice:

"Guy, would you know the place again, even if years were to pass before coming hither?"

"Why?"

"I may want to come, and die and be buried there, for that grave contains my all upon this earth—oh, Heaven, my all!"

"Stay. I will prepare myself so that I can find it at any time."

He drew out a small compass from his saddle-bags, stepped back to the new-made grave, took observations and measurements to a couple of

trees, marked them carefully, entered the result in a memorandum-book, copied it, tore out the leaf and handed it to his mourning friend, and continued:

"Now any one can find the sacred spot that has the slightest knowledge of surveying. Come home with me, Bennett. You need rest. The fearful night through which you have passed will produce sickness, if you are not very careful."

"Me rest? Man, man! what are you talking about! I have sworn to know nothing about rest or sleep—have a life work to do, and woe to him who attempts to stay me from it."

"Far be that from me. On the contrary I have said I would go with you—and I will. But, both of us need preparation—arms, ammunition, food. We cannot go thus empty-handed into the wilderness—to fight an entire race."

"You are right—right," was the sad reply. "It must be as you say—and I will go with you. But, once upon the trail, nothing, so help me Heaven, shall stop me—nothing but death!"

"Amen."

Two days given to rest and preparation, and without any notice to his friend, Roger Bennett slipped away upon the trail of vengeance that was soon to make his name a wonder and a terror to the red-man, from the Mississippi to the rock-ribbed sierras!

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST BLOW.

THE morning of the third day after the murdered family had been buried, and just as the light was beginning to streak the eastern sky, a man was kneeling amid the ashes that covered the newly-made grave. He had been there, had remained motionless from midnight, save as now and then he raised his hands in supplication or shook his clinched fists in menace at an unseen enemy.

In stature he was above six feet; with long black hair, a face that once might have been pleasant to look upon, but was now the very incarnation of fierceness; restless eyes that shot forth fire at the slightest noise; a form molded for exertion and endurance; broad shoulders, deep, round chest, and remarkably sinewy and well-finished limbs, and bearded lips that appeared to have lost the power of smiling.

It was Roger Bennett, but so strangely altered within the last few days, that those who knew him best would have been very likely to have passed him as a stranger. But something of this was without doubt owing to his dress. He had discarded everything that told of civilization save only the high y wrought, finely finished and latest improved weapons. His garments now consisted of the customary hunting-shirt and leggings adopted by trappers, made from the toughest deer skin, and in place of a hat he had bound a scarlet sash around his head, with the ends hanging behind, which added an additional fierceness to his at all times striking appearance.

"May God help me to ever keep my oath in mind," he muttered, with strange, wild savagery, as he at length arose from the ground; "never permit me to forget it, for even a single instant—let nothing tempt me from it, and help me to carry it out to the uttermost limit. Oh, for the first scalp to tell that the hour of my revenge had commenced!"

Hollow-cheeked, and with eyes that burned with the baleful light of at least partial insanity, the man started to his feet and looked around upon every side. He was a skillful woodsman, and some unusual sound had attracted his attention. He had always been noted as a most successful hunter, and now that he had become a hunter of men, his motions were ten-fold as crafty and noiseless, and without rising from the ground, he crept as swiftly as a disturbed and alarmed serpent might have done, to the shelter of the timber, and crouched amid the underbrush.

A very short time convinced him that it was not an Indian as he had suspected. A deer wandered from the cover, looked around with its proud head erect, and then dashed away unharmed. He had no bullets for such game. That which he hunted was of a far different nature, and he began searching for their trail, almost cursing himself that he had been so long delayed by listening to the advice of his friend.

The swooping of the Indians had evidently been long premeditated and carefully carried out. The trail was well hidden, and where circumstances had forbidden that to be done, was so confused that the most skillful and trained eye would have been at fault, both as to num-

bers and the direction they intended to travel. Not long, however, did the sternly-determined man pause to consider. Thought would have resulted in insanity—action was his only safety.

"The red wolves burrow in the ground in all parts of the prairie, and hide in the rocks in every portion of the mountains," he muttered, and marking the course of the sun, he struck and followed a western trail, not to be turned aside by any obstacle.

His impatience had led him to believe that he would not be very long in finding food for his vengeance, but in that he was very much disappointed. All day long he tracked the wilderness of prairie, threaded the tangled sloughs, crept through the fastnesses of the wild woods, without finding any thing that in the least tended to gratify his malice, and as the night was slowly gathering around again, he began to give way to despair, and uncommon fatigue claimed its due reward of rest.

He flung himself upon the hard ground; ate of the food he had brought with him; drank from a little thread of a stream that stole its silvery way amid the mossy banks, and for a time was unconscious to all that was passing around. But man with such a volcanic fire burning in his heart and brain can never know long-continued repose, and before the first watch of the stars was over, he was again upon his feet, and with his face turned westward, still plodding on.

Out from the timber, where his brief halt had been made, into the prairie; through its long, tangled grass to a swift-running stream; plunging amid the cold waters to the opposite side; up a steep bank; into another belt of woodland, he continued, and then he suddenly paused and became as rigid as if his frame had been molded of iron.

The sharp, shrill neighing of a horse rung clearly out upon the night air, sounding strangely familiar to him, and his movements were quickened until he could plainly see the form of the noble animal standing out in bold relief against the dark background. Then he paused, reflected, and very soon came to a conclusion.

The first glance satisfied him that the horse was one of his own—the very one he had fancied and depended upon the most—a swift and tireless runner, whom he had carefully trained. That he was separated from and calling to his mates he was also convinced, but was puzzled to find him in so lonely a place, and evidently away from any camping-ground. Yet pleasure at finding him was for the time more powerful than any other emotion, and he was about to step forward, release him and mount, when a stirring in a neighboring thicket recalled him to a sense of his own danger, and drawing back, he prepared his weapons for immediate use.

In an instant after, a young warrior stepped out into the moonlight, and the white man saw that he was ignorant of his presence, and choking down his revenge, he waited to ascertain what he was doing there, and learn something, if possible, of the location of the rest of the tribe.

With the strange habit of his race, even at his years, and they could scarcely have been twenty, the Indian looked cautiously upon every side and listened long and eagerly. Evidently he was upon the watch—waiting for the coming of some one, and yet fearful the meeting would be discovered. But at length he appeared satisfied, and placing his fingers to his lips imitated to perfection the quavering cry of the wild turkey when summoning the flock around him. Thrice it was repeated—then answered at a distance, and soon a young squaw came cautiously from the denser part of the woods and stood by his side.

"The Fawn comes when its mate calls," she said, taking the hand of the warrior and looking up into his face with affection and trust.

"It is well," he replied, though without the slightest return of her caresses. "Where are the people of the red-man?"

"In the valley where the great waters run to the south."

"Has the Manitou of slumber closed their eyes?"

"No. They are feasting upon the cattle stolen from the pale-face and dividing his goods."

"But the elder braves did not get all," he answered, with a cunning smile. "When the great wigwam of the pale-face was blazing and roaring like a prairie fire, and the knife and hatchet were dripping with blood—when every soul was intent upon plunder—I found these and brought them to her who is to fill my lodge, be my wife, dress my venison and make my moccasins."

Throwing aside his blanket, he showed, glittering upon his dark, broad breast, a chain and some little trinkets of gold, that the watching

man recognized as having been his wedding gift to his wife. Instantly his rifle was raised. But he knew that he must restrain his fiery rage yet for a time if he hoped to obtain information that would inure to his future success. Yet he trembled violently—so distinctly could he hear the beating of his own heart, that he feared the others would do the same, and pressed his hand heavily upon it to still its beatings.

With a cry of exceeding joy the girl transferred the shining baubles to her own neck. To her eyes there was more of wealth in them than all the mines of India could contain, and her happiness was greatly augmented when her lover drew from his pouch some rings, saying:

"These Black Wolf tore from the fingers of the little ones as they lay gasping in death. The blood of the pale-face papposes that is yet clinging to them will make them doubly dear."

She took them—examined them critically, attempted to place them upon her fingers, laughed at their pettiness, and, having also strung them upon the chain, asked:

"Is this all?"

"What more could Black Wolf bring her?"

"What! no scalp!" she almost sighed. "No scalp! The young brave comes back from his first war-path and brings no scalp to hang in his wigwam, and no long silken hair to fringe his leggings."

"There were elder and—"

"Better warriors! For shame."

"But the chiefs."

"What shall I say when the girls of the tribe taunt me and say that my brave has a coward heart—that his knife is dull and he is afraid of blood?"

"Say that—"

"My ears are deaf."

She was about to turn reproachfully away from him when she saw that he had been deceiving her—that the dearest gift of all had been kept to the last.

From beneath the blanket, where he had safely carried it, the young savage drew a fresh scalp. The blood upon it was yet scarcely dried, and as he held it up before her dancing eyes the soft hair streamed down in a nut-brown shower, almost reaching the ground, and the white man shrunk back shuddering—was almost blinded with tears—as the terrible fate of his eldest daughter was again thrust upon him.

But he set his teeth like the jaws of a vise—choked down his breath and yet waited. The black-hearted fiend to whom murder was but a pastime, notwithstanding his few years, and the equally savage girl, were both in his power, and with something of the passions of the feline race, he took pleasure in toying with them, before crushing. And yet the strain upon his nerves was terrible, almost more than his iron will could bear—his face as blanched and rigid as that of a corpse, and nothing but the fearful ordeal of the past few days enabled him to do so—nothing but the mighty determination to carry out his oath!

It was not very long, however, that he could thus restrain himself—would have been contrary to human nature had he done so, and every moment that was consumed in the examination and discussion of the scalp appeared to him as days of the most bitter torture.

"When the brave," returned the squaw, "has gotten five more like this he can claim a place in the council-lodge, and his name will be sung by the great Medicine of the tribe."

"Yes," he replied moodily, as if the time of honor was yet very far distant.

"And may yet become a chief?"

"Yes. But the Fawn will not wait until that time to become his wife?"

"Why not?" she questioned with the characteristic coyness of her sex, even though at the same time looking up proudly to him.

"Because it may yet be many winters away. She must remember that this is his first scalp."

"AND MINE!" thundered the white man, as rifle and pistol were discharged, and he sprang like a panther leaping for its prey upon them, with his drawn knife in hand.

With fiendish exultation that but a few days previous would have been entirely foreign to his nature, Roger Bennett watched the girl writhing in agony. She was stretched upon the ground beside her lover, to whom death must have come instantly, for the bullet had cleft his heart. Perchance there might even then something of pity have crept into his soul had not her trembling fingers still clutched the soft tresses of his murdered darling, for he was only in the novitiate of blood. But that sight made him as remorseless as the cub-robbed bear or the starving wolf—and almost before the spirit of the

squaw had gone upon the mysterious journey to the happy-hunting-grounds she had been taught to believe was the heaven of her race, her scalp was circled by the sharp knife, torn away and hung blood-dripping by that of her dark lover.

They were the first victims sacrificed upon the altar of vengeance, that would yet be almost buried beneath bleaching bones and skulls, and the strong man trembled as a terrified little child would have done when he looked upon the work of his own hands.

He had yet to be fearfully educated up to the standard of devilish indifference to human suffering, even though he gave the deed no thought as to murder and looked upon it in the light of a holy action—one that would be justified and even applauded in the courts of the other world.

But the die once cast and the first natural feelings overcome, he was once again himself and began coolly calculating what was the next best thing to be done to carry out the life to which he had devoted himself—how he could most effectually strike terror to the hearts of the Indians—make them shudder even at his name—flee at his coming and make his path of gory revenge easy.

The little he had heard, coupled with his knowledge of the country, satisfied him where the encampment of the Indians was to be found, and that it was not distant, and having disentangled the long hair from the death-grasp of the squaw, and buried the precious scalp, he secured the chain and appendages and placed them next to his heart—there to be worn until its beatings should cease.

Then he compelled the startled horse to submit to the burden of the corpses—mounted behind them—rode carefully forward until he came very near to the spot where the Indians were making merry over their plunder; then swinging aloft the blood-dripping scalps of the Indian girl and her lover, he dashed at headlong speed through the village, with yells such as they had never before heard uttered by mortal lips—scattered all before him—flung the mutilated bodies into the middle of a circle of warriors, and was away, swift as light, before any could recover from their surprise.

It was a terrible alarm to the cowardly and superstitious red-men—they magnified him into a giant, and with one voice proclaimed him THE SCALP KING!

CHAPTER III.

THE WRESTLE FOR LIFE.

NEVER had the red-man been more alarmed—never could they be than when the Scalp King swept like an avenging Manitou through their village and dashed down the dead and scalped bodies of the young warrior and the squaw. If the earth had suddenly opened and swallowed them—if the sky had rained fire—they could not have been more so.

Dumb with the shock—some of them cried with grief—they sat speechless—sat gathered in groups around their fires—trembling at every sound, and momentarily expecting the return of their Nemesis, until the rising of the sun somewhat reassured them and they could reason logically enough to determine that it was but the desperate undertaking of a single man—that their dead had been surprised in the forest, and that it was not the Matcha Manitou or one of his attendants.

The horse most certainly was not a spirit one. The footprints could be plainly seen, and some of their number could even show the marks of his iron-shod hoof where he had trampled them down. And so, by degrees, as they became more possessed, many recognized the man himself, and understood, in his actions, a plain, and to them natural revenge for the burning of his home and the killing of his wife and children.

But the very deed he had been so successful in accomplishing proved to them that he was no common enemy—was one that would scruple at nothing, and that it behooved them to be constantly upon their guard against being surprised, for might he not return at any instant?

The gray heads pondered over this—the young shrunk behind the covering of the wigwams, and scouts were dispatched in every direction, and swift runners sent to search and report as to the double killing of the previous night. This they were not long in doing. Even before the waiting populace were prepared for the message, they came back bearing with them the scalps, which they had found suspended to the limb of a tree, and the braves gathered and questioned as to what manner of man he could be who would thus leave the trophies of victory behind.

This, however, they found to be the rule, for runners hurried back from the direction in which he had disappeared, with like ghastly

records of death, until the two had increased to half a dozen, and even the most lion-hearted of the brawny warriors began to feel anxious for the safety of their own.

But rendered brave by numbers, even as are the wolves when crowding around the dying buffalo that once had been the monarch of the prairie, they boldly talked of what they would do when they met him, and how quickly they would take his trail and return with his scalp hanging to their belts.

"He is but a man!" sneered the old Medicine, who by virtue of his office, and his years, was exempt from war, and consequently had no fear of being summoned to undertake any thing of danger; "and are you not the same? He is nothing but a pale-face dog! Had not the snows of nearly a hundred winters been sifted upon my hair, and stiffened my sinews until they have become stiff and knotted as the oak, the sun should not go down before his head should lie low in the dust, and his black heart be roasting in the fire."

"My brother speaks well," replied the chief, though even he as yet made no movement.

"He must be hunted," continued the old Medicine, warming with the subject, "with a tireless vengeance—permitted no rest either by night or day. Have my brothers suddenly become cowards? But yesterday they were loud in their boasting that they would sweep the pale-face from their hunting-grounds even as the winds of winter do the dry leaves."

"He shall die!"

"But how and when? Will the red man wait until his path is marked by blood and the scalps he has taken outnumber the beaver-skins of the best hunter? Will they wait until their wives and children are butchered as the wolf-driven deer—every head is bowed in grief and there is mourning in every wigwam? Are ye men? Or has the Evil Spirit changed you all into cowardly, trembling women?"

"The warriors will take the trail of vengeance," commanded the chief, ashamed of their hesitation. "Let them go as silently as the serpent, and their coil be as strong and their sting as deadly!"

To win such a scalp would have been glory enough for a lifetime for such men, but they knew the undertaking was one of uncommon danger, and prepared for it as they had never done before. And few were emulous to go alone. They appreciated to the full the motto that in union there is strength, and the great majority chose rather to hunt in couples or small bodies than alone.

But the great war-chief, Wah-pe-hah-a-shik, or Big Elk, had nerved himself to the point of fighting the battle single-handed. He was the giant of the tribe—noted for uncommon strength—could bring a buffalo bull tumbling to its knees by a single blow of his iron fist—was more than a match for any two in wrestling—wielded as if it had been a feather, a battle-ax that could scarcely be lifted by the majority, and never yet had met his equal in a hand-to-hand struggle.

"Let the red-men hunt in packs like sneaking wolves," he hissed, from between his huge tusk-like teeth, when questioned of his purpose. "I go alone! When the dog of a pale-face sees me, even from afar, he will tremble and beg for his miserable life. When the horns of the Big Elk are bent in wrath, nothing can stand before them. He takes the trail of war, and when he comes back he will have the pale face tied as a prisoner to his horse's tail, or his scalp will be swinging at his saddle-bow and his body be hurled to the vultures as food."

But notwithstanding all this bravado—and no race more than the Indians is famous for it—he took exceeding care in the preparation of his weapons and to paint his half-naked body in the most terrible manner—streaking his black skin with white until it resembled a skeleton and his head until it looked like a grinning skull, in order to strike terror into the heart of his enemy.

The scouts had tracked the white man to a lone mountain in the vicinity. Wearied by the severe toil and intense excitement of the previous night, he had found it necessary to seek some place where he could rest in comparative security, and the mountain offered the best possible retreat.

It arose in the center of a prairie plain, with one side cut bald and stern from the very top—most layer to the foundation-stone, and afforded a rare look-out; had a broad, open plateau upon the top—the very place for his own safety and his enemies' harm.

Concealing his horse some distance in a huge gap or a sort of cave in the hill, where it would require minute search to discover him, the

wearied man had stretched himself, and had for a time slept the heavy sleep of exhaustion.

Nothing came to disturb him, and when the morning dawned again all was as tranquil as if there was neither bloodshed, suffering or death in the world. And as he lay listlessly watching the ever-moving panorama of nature, the green billows of grass waving like the ocean, and the leaves of the forest breathing and fluttering a never-ceasing psalm, he suddenly became aware that the Indians had gathered in full force below and had discovered his hiding-place.

This gave him no uneasiness. A smile of satisfaction almost broke the stern lines of his lips as he seized his rifle, whose deadly range they appeared to be inclined to tempt, for ever and anon one dashed forward upon his well-broken horse, circled around out of long gunshot, and then waving his hands tauntingly would retire again.

"That may be tried once too often," growled the watcher, as he somewhat shifted his ground—turned his back more to the sun, so that it would not dazzle his eyes—raised the sights of his weapon for a greater range and waited another approach.

Soon a young chief, eager to show his bravery, his perfect horsemanship and to win a name, darted forward, paused and shouted his cry of battle and defiance. But that pause was sufficient for the sounding of his death-knell. With a groan of anguish he fell backward; the affrighted horse sprang from under him, and another corpse was hurled to the ground.

The Indians now drew still further away; then they surrounded the chief, talked loudly and gesticulated frantically. And thus matters remained for hours, when a faint crackling of dry branches caught his ears. He was instantly upon his feet and saw that the opportunity he had longed for was brought to his very door—that revenge worthy of his soul was open to him—if he could compass it.

The great war-chief of his enemies was at but a little distance, painted in the most fantastic manner possible and armed to the teeth! For a few moments the two men stood regarding each other and measuring strength.

"I am Wah-pe-hah-a-shik, the Big Elk," said the Indian, striking his breast proudly.

"And therefore your scalp will be of more value to me," replied the white man, as if the matter was already decided.

"Let the pale-face get it—if he can!" was the sneering retort. "I have come alone on his trail, to take him with my own hands, and drag him like a dog to the village."

Then the tomahawk of the Indian was whirled so suddenly, swiftly, and with such accurate aim that, despite the instantaneous movement of the head of his antagonist, a heavy lock of his black hair was shorn away and scattered in threads upon the ground.

The white man, with a fierce cry, rushed upon the chief, and they became interlocked as with bands of iron.

For once the Herculean savage had found his equal both in strength and cunning—in mighty will and in reckless daring—one who was in every sense his rival.

Wounds were given and taken such as would have made the weak-hearted grow faint, without the slightest notice being taken of them. It was a battle of giants. It was blow for blow and strength for strength; subterfuge against subterfuge and daring opposed to daring; unflinching eye to unflinching eye, and every device known to Indian and Indian-fighter.

Suddenly the Indian dropped upon his knees, and by the exertion of his immense strength, coupled with the advantage he had gained, he threw his antagonist over his head and caused him to measure his length upon the ground. The breath was almost knocked out of his body; he was momentarily stunned.

With a whoop of victory the chief instantly rushed forward. But, ready for even that dire emergency, at the moment the Indian was about to throw himself on him, the Scalp King's feet were raised, and he sent him backward howling with pain.

Upon his feet again in a moment, again they rushed together, and the hand-to-hand struggle was renewed with more ferocity than before, if such a thing was possible. Renewed, continued, until both were scant of breath; their iron muscled trembled, their footing became unsteady, great streams of sweat were rolling down from brow and body, and something of the fiery light began to fade from their flashing eyes.

Then again the wily savage resorted to stratagem—the same almost as before, but not with so definable a result. The white man was only

thrown to a distance, and was uninjured. Pausing for a moment to recover his breath before crushing his enemy at a single knife-blow, the whoop upon the savage's lips was only half uttered, and ended in a death-wail, for as he dashed forward he was met by a brace of swift-winged bullets from Bennett's little bosom revolver, and the red giant fell forward upon his face, pierced through the heart.

The Scalp King wiped the heavy drops of moisture from his brow—drew a long, deep breath, and listened. Then came action. First scalping the dead chief, Bennett dragged the body to the brow of the cliff, hurled it down, tossed the valued lock of hair and little circle of skin after it, and shouted his never-to-be-forgotten cry of triumph and defiance!

It was answered by yells of rage as the tribe comprehended what had been done, and a hundred bows were bent, a hundred arrows vainly fired at the form that stood as a statue of stone upon the bold summit of the mountain. Then they rushed forward *en masse* to capture him, and terribly avenge their fallen chieftain—surrounded the hill, explored it at every point, and found nothing to repay them for their labor.

The Scalp King had as utterly disappeared as if he had vanished in the thin air!

CHAPTER IV.

SURROUNDED BY FIRE.

FROM that day forward the Scalp King became a living terror. Though hunted from one fastness to another, the trail was literally strewn with dead, and scalps hung from many a bush. He seemed ubiquitous, for the scouts and runners reported him as being, at the same hour, in widely different places. The death-wail in the lodges became constant. Even the oldest warriors were seized with a dread of such power as their slayer appeared to possess. To fly from that fatal region was their now serious purpose, when one day a couple of young runners came in, reporting that they had discovered their dread enemy encamped on the verge of the great prairie, in open sight.

Instantly all was commotion. To surround and capture him seemed an easy task, if he indeed was there. Ascending the high hill overlooking the boundless plain, the chiefs beheld the man and horse reposing on the still luxuriant but dry grass, not more than a mile away. They could scarcely repress the exultant shout which throbbed in their throats; but their decision was instantly made. To fire the grass to the windward in an encompassing line was the order, and almost before the adventurous man was aware, he was literally framed in fire.

As he was lying half-dreaming, the sharp, terrified snorting of his horse recalled him to a sense of danger, and, starting to his feet, he saw that the dry herbage had been fired upon every side.

"By Heaven!" he muttered, instantly comprehending what had been done and its terrible consequences. "By Heaven! I am hemmed in—surrounded! The red devils have fired the prairie at every point!"

The flames that had been kindled at hundreds of places among the rank and dry herbage, were, even as he spoke, leaping madly toward him from all sides; the black clouds of smoke rolled along before the flames like the waves of a great ocean, and the horrid whoops of the Indians filled the air.

Springing to his feet he mounted his startled horse—gave him the rein and urged him forward toward the east, in the direct line of the wind, and into the rolling, sweltering columns of smoke until lost to every watching eye; then he dismounted and prepared to meet the flames that surged upward as if from the boiling ocean of hell! With rapid movements he tore away and cut his blankets to pieces, blindfolded his trembling steed, covered the mouth and nostrils, veiled his own face, flung himself on again, headed directly for the bastion of fire, drove the spur deep and dashed against the seemingly impassable barrier.

The burning of a city is as mere pastime for the flame-king to that which follows when thousands of acres are in a glow; when the fuel is over-dry for the resistless reaper, and the wind whistles, surges, hisses, roars and claps its hands for joy. The destruction of a forest is nearer to it, and yet tame, for it is confined within bounds, while the other disregards limits and leaps with more than panther bounds to shrivel up and utterly destroy. The prairie fire is the monarch of all conflagrations—the fearful sublimity that can only be matched by a burning world!

The surging waves of living flame struck man and horse and hurled them backward! His hair crisped, crackled, shriveled into ashes—his flesh

appeared to be burning—his panting steed floundered, but to be lifted by the merciless spur and the iron arm of the rider. But brute force cannot long survive so terrible an ordeal, and human intellect will wander and turn to imbecility at last.

Yet on—on like doom! Then the flames grew to be less scorching—the air more cool—the blood boils less fiercely in his veins and about his heart. But even when hope—a faint, shadowy hope, was again springing up within his heart, the poor exhausted steed reels like a drunken man—totters and falls. No! yet once more his noble spirit answers the cheering call and the deeply driven spur of the rider. He springs forward, unconquered to the last—the flame surges backward—the black smoke is vomited behind—he has outridden the line of fire!

"Thank God!"

Never were the words more reverently and gratefully spoken than when he sprung or rather fell once more to the ground, tore the covering from both himself and steed and breathed something of pure air again. He is safe! He has beaten the tireless demon of the flames in its whirlwind race. The roaring of the fire-flecked tempest is behind—is a perfect safeguard against any who might attempt to follow.

But his peril is not yet ended.

The ground is hot as the forge of a blacksmith, and as he stands gasping by the side of his panting steed and both are almost vainly trying to recover the use of their parched lungs, he sees before only a waste of burning death! To rest is to perish, and, walking by the side of his almost matchless horse, tears fill his eyes as he sees how much he has suffered—how hair and even flesh had been burnt away—how the almost sightless eyes are turned toward him as if claiming pity.

A moment's observation satisfied him that death would be mercy—that it must come—come at last, and only to be preceded by the most intense suffering; so drawing a pistol, heated so hot that he wondered it had not exploded, he fired, and the noblest runner of the prairies lay quivering in death.

Then again the wretched, scorched, blistered wreck of a man staggers forward—for one, two, three hours of agony. A most terrible thirst had then fastened upon him. It is water or death! Faint and dizzy he still struggles on, urged by the instinct of self-preservation and the fierce, implacable vengeance which was syllabled in his oath. He must not die yet for his work is only half done! The parched and blackened earth at last swims around him. But, suddenly, something seems grateful to his numbed feet; another step forward and he falls into the bed of a little stream.

"Water, blessed heaven! water!"

The cool waves momentarily cool his brain and make him forgetful of what he has passed through, and a brief but heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving escaped from his now blackened and crisped and bleeding lips.

When the fire had utterly ceased and the ground became cool enough to travel over with safety, the Indians scattered over the black plain in search of their late and dreaded enemy, and their keen eyes were not long in distinguishing the body of the horse, and at a little distance portions of a blanket and buckskin hunting shirt, and then charred bones that were easily recognized as once having belonged to a human being.

Then such a shout of rejoicing went up from their lips as never before had rung over the prairie. They leaped, danced and sung with frantic delight, and in their insane malice gathered up the fragments that the fire had failed to consume and carried them to their camping-ground to prove that the Scalp King was no more.

For several days succeeding, the Indians celebrated the event by feast upon feast. First it was buffalo-feast; then antelope-feast; then bear-feast—all finally ending in the dog-feast, the most noted of all their revels. This continued far into the morning of the fifth day after their enemy's supposed destruction, when, suddenly, their mirth was hushed, for from the mountain that frowned down upon them rung a strangely-familiar cry, and looking up they saw a giant form standing there, showering down curses, as it were, from uplifted hands.

CHAPTER V.

THE DEAD RIDER.

CUNNING as the Indians fancied themselves to be, and well versed as they were in prairie and woodland life, they had permitted themselves to be deceived. A careful examination of the

skeleton that had been found, and held high carnival over, would have satisfied them that they were the bones of a man very much less in stature than him they sought. But the certain identity of the horse had very much assisted to this end, and the fact that another wanderer might have been caught in the sea of fire, or that one of the victims of the white man might have been lying there, entirely escaped their minds.

To this oversight the latter owed his safety, for in his helpless condition the most feeble hand that could grasp a hatchet could have brained him, and the most unskilled with a knife have cut away his scalp with impunity.

Even when hidden but scantily in the willows and reeds that marked the winding path of the little water-course, his ear had heard and comprehended their songs of rejoicing and nerved him to bear his sufferings without a murmur.

The cries were the incentive to action.

Making a pulp of the soft willow bark and the wild gentian root, he applied it to his blistered feet and limbs. A large snake which he found reposing on the water's edge he readily killed. This was skinned at once, and strips of its soft, tough hide were made to do perfect service as bandages and serviceable moccasins for his swollen feet.

His weapons were safe. He had clung to them even in the last extremity, and would have been found, if at all, with them tightly clinched in his hands. But the loss of his beautiful and faithful horse was a terrible calamity, and one that increased his dreams of and desire for vengeance—if there was anything upon earth that could do that.

Upon himself, consequently, he must depend, at least for the present—at least until another horse could be procured that would carry him fast and far. But before this could be accomplished rest, relaxation from labor and excitement and much of care had to be resorted to—and he began reflecting upon the best place for hiding in security. This was most certainly to be found in the fastness of the mountain, and long before the feasting and rejoicing of the red man was at its height he had lost his trail amid the windings of the rocks.

Convinced by his former explorations that a cave existed in the mountain, he now set about looking for it in earnest. If such a haunt could be found his safety was assured, and his dread work could be consummated.

At but a little distance from the spot where he had fastened his horse a small rift in the rocks caught his eye. It was easy of access, and very soon he stood within a rough passage, that soon terminated at a yawning chasm. Across that was what he readily determined must be the ante-chamber of a cavern of considerable dimensions. But that unfathomable pit was to be crossed before he could know anything of what was beyond it. It was too wide to leap, and it was hours before he had a narrow bridge constructed that enabled him to pass in safety. Then far more than his most sanguine hopes were realized, for with the everlasting rocks at his back, and the wide gulf in front, he might laugh at all the powers of the enemy to capture him.

Satisfied of this, he crawled forth and gathered wood, and prepared to make himself comfortable, and to pass the necessary hours in regaining his strength and healing his wounds. He had only to withdraw the little bridge to insure his safety.

Further explorations, however, attained a result that astonished him, as it would others in the future. He found that the cave ended in a narrow, winding passage, that constantly tended toward the top of the mountain. This he followed until a glimmer of light reached his eyes. Then labor became necessary to clear it sufficiently for his body to pass, and the loose rocks having been removed, he saw, to his infinite surprise, that it opened against the trunk of an immense tree, whose sap had been long dried up, and life lingered only in the outward husk of its thick skin and rough bark. It was a hollow, cylindrical chamber—a mysterious door, as it were, to that gallery in the hill. To cut a rude pair of stairs within the trunk was not a very severe trial, and when he had reached and enlarged the opening above sufficiently to crawl through, he found a look-out that commanded a view for several miles—that he could see distinctly into the ordinary camping-ground of the Indians. Dropping down to the ground, by means of its plentiful growth of stubby limbs, he stood upon the brow of the same precipice where he and the brawny war-chief Big Elk had met in the death-struggle. Then he raised himself to his utmost height,

shouted his cry of vengeance, and stretching out his hands, called down curses upon those who had wrecked him both in body and soul.

Now most fully he realized that his power was unbroken, and climbing the tree he dropped down, returned to the cave, and was about to stretch himself for the much-needed slumber when he chanced to remember that he had not withdrawn his bridge. To permit it to remain would be simply to invite the red-men to his lair.

Hark! Was not that a stealthy step? And then a loosened stone dropped down in the chasm!

Hastening forward to his bridge, by the faint moonlight that struggled in through the rifts, he discovered an Indian slowly traversing the one path that constituted his only safeguard.

Instantly his mind was made up. With the leap of a panther and yell of a tiger, he sprung forward and met the intruder half-way. It was a fearful place for such an encounter—only a narrow and treacherous footing, and the sharp-pointed, rocky bottom was hundreds of feet below!

But as he had sprung forward the intruder dropped upon his knees, and the white man came very near being thrown over his head. And certainly it was more the result of accident than any wise calculation that saved him. One hand had fallen upon the throat of his enemy and the other upon the timber. Yet still his fate rested upon as slender a hair as ever upheld a man from doom, and a single energetic movement of his antagonist would have sent him as food for the wolves that had their dens below!

But with the speed of thought he recovered himself—obtained a firm position, and drove his knife again and again into the breast of his appalled victim, who sunk back almost without a groan.

So unresisting had the struggle been that no smile of satisfaction rested upon the face of the conqueror, and, filled with astonishment at the result, he drew the limp body after him into his retreat, removed the treacherous bridge, and taking a blazing brand from his little fire, began examining the curiously painted face of the dead.

"Poor fool!" he muttered, as the wrinkled features of the Medicine-man were clearly revealed; "poor fool! What could have brought you here where it would have been dangerous for even the most hardy of your tribe to have ventured? But, it is all the same for vengeance. My oath was to spare neither the gray-headed nor the feeble infant, and it shall be kept to the last extremity."

Without the slightest remorse he examined the dead form, and, having satisfied himself that the Indian's pouch contained nothing of value, he placed the body in a sitting posture just outside of the cavern, and gave himself up to rest.

But his dreams wandered in a very strange direction—his fancies became the very incarnation of all that was horrible in revenge. And so deeply were these things stamped upon his brain that, long before the dawn, he arose, carried the corpse to the plain below—found the pony upon which the old Medicine-man had traveled thither, flung it rudely across, and started for the camp of the Indians. He paused when a little distance away; was busy for some time; and then his well-known cry rung in trumpet-tones, and startled alike the sleeping and the waking.

From the ground where they had lain—from the shelter of bark and skin-covered wigwam, all sprung in alarm, and each, with pale lips, questioned the other. Nothing had as yet been seen—nothing had been heard but the sound that ever proved a forerunner of something terrible.

Then the steady tramp of a horse caught their ears. Steadily, nearer and yet nearer it came, and they drew back in awe. Was it the ghastly forms of the horse and rider that had been consumed in the burning prairie? Had the great Manitou condemned him to wander thus forever over the earth?

Steadily the horse came toward them—came on until they could distinguish its form—could see that the rider was no other than the old Medicine, who (as they presumed) had been abroad upon one of his midnight excursions, and they began to vent their feelings of rage at being thus wantonly disturbed.

But the horse kept on, and when it had reached a point where the hastily-lighted torches enabled them to notice every particular, a great wail of horror rose from every lip, and they fled in amazement or flung themselves upon the ground in despair.

It was the old, honored Medicine, but dead—dead and carrying his scalp in his own right hand!

At that moment another cry rung through the wilderness of woods, and they knew it was the devilish work of one alone—that the flames had not destroyed the Scalp King!

CHAPTER VI.

A HUMAN THUNDERBOLT.

THE strangest—the most burning words would be powerless to convey any adequate idea of the feelings that found utterance in shrieks, groans and exclamations when the Indians discovered the severe blow that had been struck in the death of the old Medicine, and still more so when they gazed upon the mode that had been adopted to inform them of and give full force to it.

Indeed it was a ghastly and soul-sickening sight—would have been under any circumstances—that of a corpse mounted, riding slowly along—with the hair torn from its head—the skin slipped down in great wrinkles (as it ever does after such treatment), and the corpse carrying its own gray-haired scalp in its hand!

Nothing could have struck more terror to the very souls of the Indians. It was outdoing them in their own vocation of bestial horrors, and the dead rider would have passed on had not some of the most familiar with such scenes, prompted perhaps as much by curiosity as veneration, laid their hands upon the bridle, compelled the slow, plodding pony to come to a halt, and relieved him of his ghastly and ghostly burden.

Then the arts employed to keep the body in an upright position were plainly to be seen, and they learned a lesson they would not be slow to remember and practice upon their enemies on the first opportunity.

The chiefs and scarred warriors hastened to counsel together as to what could be done to rid their nation of the most dreadful scourge they had ever known.

The bravest and strongest among them had fallen in single combat with their enemy; who now would proclaim his willingness to take his scalp? Not a warrior among them all dared to register his vow! The head chief, as he filled, smoked and passed the great calumet from hand to hand, at length spoke:

"Brothers: the black raven of death is spreading its wings over the hunting-grounds of the red man, and there is no one to stay its flight. Since the Great Spirit called them into being from the dust of the earth, there has never been anything like this. The arrows, though headed with the fire flashing flint—though steeped in the poison of the rattlesnake, are powerless to harm—the strongest wielded battle-ax becomes as a straw, and even the fire of the prairie that is more than the breath of the evil spirit when in wrath, passes him as uninjured as the breath of June. Brothers, I have spoken."

There was no response. The most fiery natures among all that dusky circle were silent. Again and again the chieftain looked around the circle for some one to suggest action; but all were dumb, and he was forced to continue:

"Brothers: even while we are sitting idly here, the pale-faced avenger may be casting bullets that will take our lives, and sharpening the knife that will cut away our scalps. What shall be done? Even now I can hear the sound of his voice as the thunder breaking from the black cloud, and the stamp of his horse's feet, as he sweeps over the prairie, blighting everything he touches, as the sting of the adder. Even now—may the Great Spirit of whites preserve us!"

It appeared as if his words had the power to conjure up the very things they most of all dreaded, for with them came the rushing of the scattered multitude, bursting with the intelligence that, even while they were debating, the Scalp King had been upon the outskirts of their camping-ground and taken away the matchless black horse sacred to the riding of the great war-chief alone.

"It cannot be," was the response of every lip, but, even as they were uttering the words, they saw him riding swiftly away, and heard his shout of triumph as he disappeared in the direction of the mountain!

Why could they not ambush him—surround him? It was the one thing to do, and while the women and children remained at the encampment and made as great a show as possible, the warriors crept in various directions, intent upon forming a living cordon around the little mountain.

Silently as the grave—stealthy as shadows they crept along scarcely disturbing the tall

grass or making a rustle in the dry leaves. Never could night-prowling serpents have been more noiseless—never could wildcat have sneaked with less to mark its way toward the destined victim. There was nothing to tell of their progress, save it might now and then have been the sudden scampering away of some affrighted rabbit, and the screaming, circling flight of the black vultures who snuffed blood even from afar.

But, did not he for whom all these preparations were made know anything of them? Had he suddenly become both blind and deaf? Was he entirely absorbed in the horse he had captured by his daring to fill the place of the one that had been swept away by the demon of the flames?

A more noble animal it would have been very difficult to have found. Noted as a runner of the prairie, he had been captured by strategy—half trained, and stood in all his glory of waving mane, sweeping tail, glossy hide of inky blackness, save only a snowy star in his forehead; eye of fire, unbroken courage, step that seemed to scorn the dust he scattered, and, unmatched in strength, muscle and endurance, the very steed for a warrior or for one compelled to fly for his life.

Fully impressed with these things—rejoiced that fate should have been thus kind to him—the Scalp King stood by the side of his noble steed, caressing and making friends, when his attention was suddenly attracted by the strange flight of the birds, and, after a few moments of hesitation, correctly read the cause.

"The scum of the earth!" he almost hissed, with the vindictiveness of a provoked serpent. "There is none of them—no not one—who would dare to meet me in single combat. The fate of their great war-chief and miserable Medicine has turned them into the meanest of cowards, and the best blood of their hearts into water. And they think to surround me—to rush in from every side—human wolves adopting the plan of the less savage ones whose holes tunnel the prairie and whose dens are hid in the rocks—to rush in and crush me by the power of numbers! It might be so—might be so—but, Heaven preserves me. My oath is not yet fulfilled. I must live—must live!"

Yet, for all his words of caution, a very dangerous light flashed from his eyes as he watched the course of his enemies. From the height upon which he stood there was no difficulty in this, and his lips curled with ineffable scorn, and his nostrils expanded with pride as he thought how very sure his strong arm would mow a path through to safety.

Should he do it? Would the game pay for the risk? Might not a chance shot put an end to his career? Might not his scalp be the forfeit for trying to gain numbers of others?

A still more dangerous light rayed out from his eyes, and his lip curled still more with scorn as these things flashed upon his mind. Was he who had won the terrible title of the Scalp King afraid of the very ones he sought to destroy? Was it not his purpose to make them tremble even when his battle-cry was borne to their ears from afar upon the wings of the night-wind—to drive them before him even as the long-leaping panther drives the timid deer?

At once his purpose became fixed, and nothing but death could change it—that and that alone put an end to his career!

He looked to his weapons—saw that none would fail him in the hour of need—drew from the folds of his hunting-shirt a stout thong—fastened it to the handle of the huge battle-ax he had taken from the dead giant chief, and still retained as a trophy of victory—secured it around his waist, and boldly rode toward the circle of skulking warriors—rode as if he knew not of their presence—though with every sense upon the alert.

Those who were the nearest drew back and hid themselves—permitted him to pass. It was not their intention to make themselves known until he was entirely within their toils—until the dark circle could close around him from every portion of the circumference to the center—until they could consolidate their forces upon a single point and utterly cut off all chance of escape.

Proudly the horse pranced forward, fretting at curb and rein, champing the bit and tossing specks of foam backward over his glossy raven hide and mane, curling as the fringes of a midnight cloud. And proudly sat the rider, with defiance stamped upon every feature—one hand checking the impatient steed, and the other grasping his battle-ax.

But, so still was the prairie—so hushed the wind—so silent had become the birds, that the

ringing hoof of the courser appeared to be an almost impious sound. Silent—silent as the long-used abode of the dead—silent as that "dreary desolation—a country graveyard!"

Then, as if all the fiends of hell had been suddenly let loose upon a holiday, there arose upon every side hideously painted forms and the most terrible shrieks that ever were permitted to frighten the fair face of nature and disturb her repose. Half a thousand warriors leaped from the darkness of concealment into the broad blaze of open day, and with a simultaneous and well-directed movement, closed upon him, leaving no single loop-hole unprotected by arrow, knife, tomahawk or club.

Still there was no change in the attitude of the Scalp King—still he rode coolly forward, expecting that the air would be momentarily filled with feathered shafts. But it was not to be so, and in the fact he read their determination to take him alive, even though it cost one-half their tribe! Yet would he wait until there was an absolute certainty of the programme being carried out—would he not strike a single blow for liberty and revenge?

To any uninterested looker-on it would have appeared so for a time. Then, and even as the dark line of human demons was drawing very near to him, he raised himself, shouted his terrible battle-cry, wheeled his fiery horse and drove him forward with the rapidity almost of lightning, while his heavy battle-ax whirled around his head as if it had been but a play-thing.

Woe to any who should feel its blows!

The few who were desperate enough to attempt to withstand his progress were hurled back with skulls crushed as if they had been but egg-shells. It was the career of a demon man upon a demon horse. Once through the circle that had been no more to keep him back than if it had been the slender silken thread spun by the tiny garden spider from flower to flower, he wheeled, darted hither and thither—crushing all, sparing none, until, tired with the bloody pastime, he gave his horse the rein, and with incredible speed regained the fastnesses of the mountain.

It had been as the swoop of the vulture, and the dead and dying were upon every side!

But not scathless had the bold, strong man come forth from the battle. More than one wound told that, even though overawed and trampled down, the worms had not been entirely stingless. There was an arrow-head here—the marks of knife and hatchet there, and as he sat upon his lofty lookout, and watched the Indians as they removed the wounded, it was next to impossible for him to keep moans from breaking the stern lines of his lips.

He had indeed conquered, but it might be that he would be the Scalp King no more.

CHAPTER VII.

THE AVENGER'S ANSWER.

WITH all possible speed the Indians buried their dead, gathered their few articles of value, and fled to join another portion of the tribe, whose camping-ground was at a little distance—some half-a-dozen miles—and situated upon the bank of a large river.

They believed, and not without good reason, that now if ever would be their best opportunity to do so without molestation—that their seemingly irresistible enemy could not have escaped without wounds, and he would be in no condition to follow. And yet, even while still in sight, a great flame arose from their camping-ground, and very soon all that had hitherto sheltered them was in ashes. Their village had been consumed!

Well they realized that the flames had been started and fed and guided by the hand of the Scalp King! And yet when the flames were at their fiercest, they were certain they saw him seated upon the lone rock, with his hands upraised as if appealing to the Great Spirit—would have testified that they heard his voice both at the fire and upon the mountain and at the same moment!

Believing that he would not be disturbed in his stronghold, Bennett now gave himself up to rest and recruiting, and even sloth for a season. Calm must always follow storm in life as it does in nature. Still he was never entirely off his guard—never ceased to fortify the cavern, which might yet many times stand between him and death, and made every preparation to stand a siege should he be driven there and watched by numbers.

By dint of extreme patience he had constructed another and a better bridge, and learned his horse to cross it, so that he could keep him constantly under his eye. He had also taught him

to come at his whistle, to lie down and remain almost motionless; in fact, everything that a true Western hunter would consider of the slightest use in his dangerous calling. This had been a labor of love as well as of safety, and the noble animal responded to all his care and attention, and loved and followed him with even more than brute homage and fidelity.

But the rest he had fancied was not to be entirely unbroken. One day, as he was returning from a short expedition, he saw the figure of a man slowly climbing the rocky path that led to his retreat, and, filled with astonishment, raised his rifle to fire, when it instantly disappeared behind a wooded point, and, do what he might, he could see nothing of it again.

Was he haunted by the ghost of some one he had murdered? The thought filled him with horror. If so, might not his every step be dogged in the same manner? Might they not stand in his path by day and crowd around his pillow by night? It was a subject that he did not like to dwell upon, and he hastened home to be out of the way of the fast-gathering twilight.

He had left his bridge down so as to recross it, and as he did so he became aware that somebody had been before him—that his cave was already occupied! It must be by an enemy, and another battle was imminent. Traversing the bridge with all possible speed, he saw that his visitor was making himself strangely at home—had kindled a fire and was cooking, and was commenting upon the situation.

"I wonder what sort of a devil's den I have got into?" he said, as he filled and lighted a pipe. "If it is here that Bennett harbors, he must have a lonely time, even though he has everything his own way, like old Robinson Crusoe."

The voice recalled the past. It rushed upon his memory like a spring-time flood, and rushing forward he clasped the intruder in his arms, and murmured, in a broken, choking voice:

"Guy, Guy Oliver!"

"Yes," replied the young physician, as he shook himself clear and returned the warm pressure of the hand that was wringing his arm; "yes, it's I. But you needn't crush me entirely in your bear's hug. Sit down, old fellow, and let us talk over matters."

"Wait. My enemies are as the leaves of the forest, and I know not of their coming."

He hastened to withdraw the bridge, stopped to command his feelings by the excuse of seeing to the comfort of his horse, and then, taking a place by his unexpected friend, asked:

"How did you find me, Guy?"

"Easily enough. The reputation of the Scalp King has penetrated to the settlements, and, putting this and that together, I made up my mind who this Scalp King was. This done, I struck out for his haunts, and here I am!"

"It was very kind—but—"

"There is to be no 'but's' about it. I don't presume I have heard a hundredth part of what you have been doing, but I have heard enough to satisfy me that you have kept your oath in a most fearful manner."

"No," was the hoarse reply. "I have scarcely begun to keep it—can never do so until death absolves me."

"This is simply madness. Now, Bennett, my good friend, listen to me and weigh well what I say. It is true I am a younger man than you, but I believe my head is clearer on this subject. I promised to help you in this devilish work—pardon me, but I can call it by no milder name—and probably would have done so had you not stolen away and given me time for serious reflection. Then I saw not only the folly, but the wickedness of it, and—"

"Hush! Heaven has blessed and protected me, has smiled upon my every effort, and consequently there can be nothing of wickedness about it."

"That's all moonshine. But, seriously, how long do you intend to continue this bloody work?"

"Until I die!"

"And that will not be very long. I learned enough of the Indians to be convinced that they are determined to come in a great body, surround this place, and either starve you out or shoot you in case you make any attempt at escape."

"Let them try it!" was the stern exclamation.

"That they will certainly do. Now listen to reason."

"I listen, but hear nothing save the pleadings for mercy of my dead wife and children," he replied, in the wildest manner, as he started up and ranged around the cave like a wild beast. "I see nothing but their beloved forms lying

stiff—oh, God!—stiff in death. It is horrible—most horrible!"

"Yes," was the solemn and low-voiced reply. "Yes, it was all you can possibly say about it—was worthy of revenge, I will not deny, and you have had sufficient to glut the most savage heart. Besides, there is nothing of discrimination in your course—nothing of punishing the guilty. It is simply wholesale slaughter."

"All that wear a red skin are alike guilty, and, as God has heard my oath, I repeat it, none, no, not one shall escape! But," and the voice softened, the lips trembled, and tears filled the burning eyes, "but tell me of—of their—their graves."

"That will be my care. With the money you left I will see that a proper stone is erected as soon as the state of the country will admit."

"Thanks!"

It was all that he could utter, and seeing the softening influence the subject had upon him, whom his professional learning clearly showed was not only the prey of frenzy but would soon (unless a check came) be wandering entirely beyond the bounds of reason—seeing this, and even with a faint hope that something might be done to stay his mad career, the young physician continued:

"By the memory of the dear ones who, I trust, are waiting for you in Heaven, I entreat you to give up this horrible life, to return with me to civilization, and manfully battle with and conquer this foolish grief."

"Foolish? Aha!"

With the words he had sprung forward and clutched his friend by the throat with one hand, while the other had drawn his knife from his belt and was waving it wildly above his head. But the calm and unflinching look of the intended victim disarmed him, and flinging himself upon the ground, he sobbed aloud:

"Oh, merciful Heaven! you know not what you are talking about. *Wait until your time comes!*"

"But if it does, I hope I shall know how to command myself. Yet, once more, will you not listen to the voice of sincere friendship?"

"Go on."

"Can I do nothing, say nothing, to tempt you to return home with me?"

"Nothing."

"Suppose you should fall from these rocks and break a limb—suppose you should be taken dangerously ill, even here in this miserable den, what then?"

"I should die without a murmur. But I have no fear of that, as I have none of death. I feel, believe, that my end is yet far distant—that many, very many scalps must be gained, ay, even as many as there were hairs torn away from—from—"

He could not finish the sentence. His emotion was too terrible for that, and it was some time before the conversation could be resumed. Then it fortunately was in a more calm strain. But nothing that the physician could urge made the slightest impression; every mention of those who had been so ruthlessly swept away set him raving.

Very late into the night they talked, and all that Guy Oliver could gain was a promise to consider the subject and give him a definite answer in the morning.

"You will not quibble about it—will not ask another or seek to urge me further?" was the question he received in return.

"I will not."

"Then, by my honor, you shall have it."

"But you have already made up your mind?"

"No—at least, not fully."

Morning came. Each had passed such a night as no one would like to struggle through for a second time. It was simply horrible. Guy Oliver had rested but little. The wild surroundings, the nature of his visit, his companion, all were opposed to tranquillity. Fatigue, however, overpowered him, and during the few hours that remained until daylight, his sleep was heavy and unbroken, even though filled with the wildest dreams.

The last he remembered of his host was seeing him seated by the fire, muttering and gesticulating fiercely, and he prayed that a good angel might descend and still the waters of that fearfully lashed soul. But when he awoke, the cavern was empty, and for a time he believed that he would never see Roger Bennett again—that he had purposely fled from him.

But in this he was mistaken. After an hour of impatient waiting, he heard the rushing of the horse up the rocks—saw him forced tremblingly across the bridge, covered with dust and foam—saw the rider spring to the ground, and started back with horror, as he flung two

fresh scalps upon the floor at his feet—two upon which the blood had not yet dried—those of an aged Indian and a child, saying, hoarsely:

"*There is my answer!*"

Nothing more could possibly be said. The mission of the physician had totally failed. He saw with alarm that the wildness of his friend had sensibly increased since he first came—that henceforth he could scarcely be held responsible for his deeds, and almost prayed that Heaven would kindly put an end to the life that could be nothing but a curse to the possessor, and to the red-man a terror.

When the sun was well up they parted—not to meet again for years—not until the then unmeaning words of the Scalp King were forced upon his throbbing brain and sorrowfully beating heart:

"*WAIT UNTIL YOUR TIME COMES!*"

CHAPTER VIII.

ONE AGAINST A THOUSAND.

To follow the career of the Scalp King for a year would be to recount a series of surprises, hair-breadth escapes, miraculous preservations and unprecedented successes.

But the wildness the physician noticed at the time of his visit, had grown upon the wifeless and childless Avenger, and with it the cunning that frequently follows lunacy. From that hour two days or nights rarely found him in the same place. He wandered about like a sin-driven ghost—flitted from spot to spot—made a home for himself in the most remote and dangerous places—appeared when supposed to be at a great distance, and the various branches of the tribe would have sworn that a murder had been committed and scalp taken from some unfortunate at precisely the same hour.

That some other of their enemies—some hunter or trapper was angry for the purloining of their game or plundering of their traps, or some settler whose horses had been stolen, might have done these deeds, while giving him the credit for it, never entered into their calculation, and he received both the glory and the shame of every murder that was committed within the circle of a hundred miles.

And while this added to his renown, and made him more to be feared, it increased his danger and the desperation of his enemies to hunt him to the death. Plan after plan was made—ambush after ambush formed—trail after trail dispatched to follow, and bands of warriors set out, after having made the most propitiatory sacrifices to the Manitou and sworn not to return without his scalp.

Yet all had thus far proved in vain. The hair might be found but the destined victim was far away. The cave in the mountains was watched, and a ringing laugh showed them the hunted man standing far above in the most mocking attitude, but when they rushed thither, the place where he stood was vacant, and he was to be seen speeding upon his famous horse like an avalanche over the plain.

He came upon the little bands of buffalo-hunters when they had almost forgotten his existence—swooped down into the encampments when the braves were absent—was seen by the lone fisher in some far-away mountain stream—dashed along the trail of the warriors themselves, and ever left behind a track of fire and blood, a wail of agony and desolated wigwams, and mourning for some one sent to the country of souls. Like a wandering curse, he was here, there and everywhere, slaying, and sparing never.

True, there were periods of rest to some at least—times when they tried to fancy that his earthly career was ended, and the warriors kept less desperate guard, and looked less to their weapons—the mother momentarily neglected to hug the little pappoose to her heart, and the fleet-footed hunters dared to make longer excursions in pursuit of game. Then, and more than likely when the wildest of storms was rending the earth—when the thunder was shaking the most solid ground and the lightning blasting, blinding and destroying, he would be seen riding fearlessly abroad, his horse skimming the sod like a swallow, or his rifle would be ringing forth doom and his scalp-knife leaving ghastly records.

Would there, could there never be an ending to this? Was the race of the red-man to be utterly exterminated? Was the life of their destroyer, indeed, so completely charmed that nothing could do him injury?

Other tribes scouted at the idea, and came to look upon those whom they had hitherto believed to be brave men as the most contemptible cowards—little, if any, better than women. And what reply could they make?

It was useless to plead what had been done. Useless to tell of baffled strategy, for it only showed their want of cunning. Useless to tell of shots fired and knife and hatchet thrown, for it but revealed their want of skill. Useless to recount the numberless engagements, for it was only a recital of lost warriors and ranks broken through as if they had been made of the long and brittle moss that waved as the beard of an old man from the gaunt, dry trees.

No, there was no reply to be made, and in despair they cried to their brethren to come and help them—to show their powers and prowess, and to prove that the curse only rested upon them.

That was a challenge that could not be disregarded after so much had been said upon the subject, and a day was appointed for a council. Runners were dispatched to all their allies entreating them to come, to bring their boldest warriors and most charmed weapons, their Medicine-men and the aged soothsayers, upon whose heads the mantles of wisdom for many years had fallen.

Fellow-feeling made some, and pride and curiosity more attend. They gathered upon the banks of the river, lighted the council-fire, smoked the mighty calumet, filled with the sacred ken-e-ken-ick, that grows only upon the graves of prophets, laid gifts of rare value upon the altar dedicated to the worship of the great Manitou, and did all that was in their power to propitiate the gods that send success in war.

The Medicines, dressed in their mystic robes of office, with jingling bells, with necklaces and ornaments of the bones and teeth of the detestable pale-faces that had been slain in battle, with batons of living, writhing serpents, whose eyes appeared to ray out lightning and tongues flame, with all the horrid regalia that their savage fancy and long years of study could produce, walked slowly around the ring of chieftains and sung their incantations, implored blessings, and breathed the most furious curses upon all within whose veins ran a single drop of pale blood.

Never had there been a more powerful gathering—never one with so much of unity of purpose—and, as if they had been but a single man, the resolution was adopted to be the death of the Scalp King. To this end the most furious, inflammatory speeches were made, and every one sought to lash himself and all who heard him into the most fiendish frenzy.

Indeed, it was a strikingly wild and picturesque scene. The bronzed forms lined with paint, the faces half-blackened, the gay trappings of the warriors, the bright-red glinting of the fire, the dismal music of the drums, and rattling of the pebble-filled gourds, the swiftly-rolling river in front, the background of tall trees and cone-shaped wigwams and savagely dancing squaws, as they waved their arms in anger and howled futile curses, all combined to make it so, to make such a pandemonium as could be rivaled in the bottomless pit!

At least so thought the Scalp King, as he stood resting his horse upon the opposite bank, hidden by the undergrowth, and calmly smiling at the preparations that he knew could have but one object—his own death. Still he remained an interested spectator, and never thought of flight—looked as if it was merely pleasant pastime and not in the least dangerous, and watched the aged tricksters as they plodded through the great Da-ya-da-ga-saw, or medicine dance—the warriors as they frantically wheeled and struck the fire-blackened post in that of the On-na-sa, or scalp-dance, and all as they whirled in or kept time to the horrid movements of the Wa-sa-sa, or that of war.

It would have been very easy for him to have fired in their midst and got away without danger. But he would almost have scorned such a thing—so easy a conquest. The wild light of insanity that was stamped upon his face, and burned in his eyes demanded deeds of greater daring—deeds that would thrill deeper into the hearts of his enemies—would bow their coward hearts into the very dust. All his actions had been thus marked, and not a single bloody leaf should be lost from his chaplet of fame.

But could he strike such a blow there and then?

On the morrow they would spread as thick as ants over the prairie, and not a single spot for miles around but would be searched. And then he must be on the alert to strike down any straggler—to dart with lightning rapidity from point to point, and teach them a lesson that would go very far against another venture of a like nature.

And not very long was he lost in thought. In

an instant his lips were set in a more firm pressure—his hand clutched his knife with determination, and his eyes flashed as baneful fires as those of the huge, diamond spotted rattlesnake, whose den is in the mountains—whose length can be measured by yards—whose scales clash together when it moves as the steel armor of a knight, and shine in the sunrays like burnished gold, not the miserable namesake that burrows in the ground with owl and yelping prairie-dog.

And so they danced and made merry in anticipation of what would come on the morrow, when they swept forth like a tempest and met the dog of a white man, hewed him into a thousand fragments; made of him a captive, and dealt a thousand deaths of torture, or drove him to his cave in the rocks, and smoked him out like a bear in the months of ice and snow.

And as on they danced, even so the Medicine-men circled around, wove their mysterious incantations, whirled their serpents, and sung of the matchless triumph that was to come. As one would grow weary and retire for a time another would take his place; as one would creep to the seclusion of the forest to rest, or to the river to cool his parched lips and overstrained throat, his position was immediately filled, and the mummeries never permitted to flag. So of their coming and going no heed was taken. Indeed, they had for the most part been forgotten. Each was absorbed in self, in trying to outdo the frantic actions that had preceded theirs—in weaving the dances of war, and scalps, and death, and torture.

Very little notice was consequently given to the movements of the old tricksters. They were only playing their usual part in the wild scenes, and when at last one paused from his rapid whirl and stepped into the circle of warriors, and bent over the fire as if to obtain a light for his pipe, none gave him even more than the slightest passing notice; failed to see that he was stealthily loosening a huge battle-ax that had been concealed beneath his long robe; knew nothing of his purposes until the foremost chief fell back with his skull split to the very shoulders; until from the thrown-aside garments of the counterfeit Medicine sprung forth the terrible Scalp King, whirling his battle-ax, and causing death upon every side as he resistlessly cut his way to the river, shouting the cry of victory!

And then even as they were slowly recovering from their surprise and terror, the central fire was hurled on high with a terrific explosion, the flames flashed out blinding and burning, and scattering living brands upon every side, adding to the fearful scene, and making them frantic for their own safety.

But yet hundreds of arrows were fired at the strong swimmer and fell upon the water like drops of spring rain. Yet useless—useless! None appeared to have touched him, often diving as he did and coming up like an otter far away, and they crawled back as they saw his horse answer his shrill whistle—saw him mount—dash away, and heard his shouts ringing in mocking laughter over the prairie!

The chief dead—felled with even more of savageness than their butchers would have used in striking down a buffalo—a number sorely wounded by the stone-headed ax and the explosion of the powder—an old Medicine discovered at a little distance with a knife still sticking in his heart and scalpless, told the fearful work that had been so dauntlessly accomplished—told how all their plans were laughed to scorn by the Scalp King.

Numbers, however, made them vallant even as wolves are, and there was mounting in hot haste and reckless spurring in the direction their enemy had taken. They intended to surround the land so as to drive him to his home in the rocky cave of the mountain. And in this they succeeded. They saw him as he rode slowly up the dubious path, and their hearts grew glad that at last they had driven the warwolf to his den and had him utterly in their power.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CAUSEWAY OF DOOM.

THOUGH not daring to make an open attack until the night should have passed, yet the Indians rendered it hideous with their howling and kept so close guard around the base of the mountain that even a fox could not have stolen through undetected.

But they need have had little fear of the Scalp King attempting any thing of the kind. While they were passing the dark hours in watchfulness and anxiety, he lay stretched at ease within his stronghold, laughing at the suc-

cess of his dangerous undertaking and thinking as to how he would yet deceive them and be miles away while they yet remained upon guard—how they would be watching bare rocks and empty walls even while he was swooping like an avenging vulture upon their unprotected camp—laughing that there were more ways than one from the bowels of the apparently solid mountain.

Not as yet, however, was he ready to vacate his comfortable quarters. His horse had been ridden hard and needed both rest and food. Not that he could not have journeyed many leagues further before he would have needed the slightest urging, but the Scalp King was a kind master—loved the steed more than any thing on earth, knew his value—that he had many a time owed his life to his fleetness, endurance and sagacity—that he would do so again, and that when on a trail either of vengeance or retreat the end was never certain.

So having groomed and fed and tethered the horse with exceeding care and tenderness, he retired to his customary place of repose and reflected upon what had transpired and what was certainly coming. Not that he had any fears of the result. He had been long a stranger to such feelings—had become accustomed to the prospect of death in every form, and literally scorned them when he gave the subject a thought.

And musing thus he at length dropped asleep and knew nothing of what was passing around him until the "gray-hooded dawn," began once more to dispute the power of the winged night. Then he was instantly upon his feet, ascended by his secret path, climbed the hollow tree, looked around and calculated the number of his enemies.

"They are as the locusts," he said, "in the seventeenth year—like the needles of the pines—also as thick as the pigeons around a roost. But, of what avail will it be? The greater the number the greater the opportunity to fulfill my oath—the greater the stream of blood that shall flow—the greater the number of scalpless wretches that shall go down to the dark grave."

So numerous were the chances to shoot down his enemies, that he could scarcely keep from getting his rifle and sending a bullet crashing among them—would have done so had he not feared that it might lead to the discovery of the manner in which he gained the summit of the mountain unseen. That would never do—would be worth his life; so, curbing his resentment, he descended, and with the resolve to wait for yet another day before he made the least effort to escape, which he was confident he could do at any time.

On reaching the cavern he was about to begin the preparation of his morning meal, when he was attracted by the uneasy motions of his horse. He knew something of his suspicious snuffing before, and crawling forward, so as to look out, he saw that a number of Indians had gained a position on the opposite side of the gulf—that they had discovered the opening to the cave, and were talking and gesticulating with great exultation.

From his hiding-place he could see and hear all that transpired without in the least exposing himself; so he crouched down and waited without the slightest tremor of nerve. They might plot, but he could counterplot, and certainly had very much the vantage-ground.

Not very long, however, was he left in doubt as to their intentions, if indeed he had any from the first. Disappearing for a time, they returned with two light, strong sticks, and threw them across the chasm. Lashed together as they had been with strong bark, they afforded a safe transit for a daring man—were of sufficient strength to sustain a number at the same time, and the grim warriors evidently intended to crowd after each other—to land at the same time, and then use their combined force against the single man.

Silently—scarcely breathing—without motion, the Scalp King sat crouched behind the point of rocks, with a face upon which glowed the most fiendish and malicious triumph that could ever have been stamped upon the features of mortal man—sat like one of the weird sisters who weave the web of fate.

Yet, after the crossing had been finished—after they had become satisfied that the end rested securely upon the rocks on the opposite side, the Indians hesitated to trust themselves upon it, or rather disagreed as to who should go first. Although it was the post of honor, none desired to claim it.

"Let a scout go first," the one who appeared to be in command whispered; "go and report it

the dog of a pale-face is sleeping. Then we will rush upon and bind him."

After a short discussion the plan was adopted. The Scalp King saw a runner preparing to cross—stole back to a little distance within the cave, stretched himself at full length, closed his eyes, breathed heavily, and counterfeited slumber so exactly as to have deceived even sharper senses than those of the affrighted and half-fledged warrior.

"The pale-face is sleeping like a little papoose," was his report. "I could have driven my knife into his heart and brought away his scalp without the slightest danger."

"It is well," was answered.

"Shall I do so now?"

"No! No!"

Danger being afar, they were all anxious to assist in and partake of the glory of the capture—eager as they had before been reluctant, and without ceremony crowded upon the improvised bridge. Still it was necessary for them to proceed with caution, and something of order was maintained. In single file they stepped forward, each placing his hands upon the shoulders of the one in front, and waited for the order to move.

It came. They stepped lightly on. The foremost had reached the center in safety, when a cry, loud and appalling as the thunder, burst upon their ears. The Scalp King sprung from his place of concealment, seized the ends of the timbers, and, by the exertion of almost superhuman strength, moved them aside, and their living load was consigned to a sudden and terrible death!

Down! down! fell logs and men, until the far-away rocks received them—splintered the one and crushed the latter out of all semblance of humanity.

Not a single one escaped. The mode they had adopted was fatal, for they clung to each other, and those who might possibly have saved themselves were dragged down to the universal doom!

Those who had not ventured fled in horror—without a thought of using their weapons—fled with the pistol shots of their enemy ringing in their ears and thinning their ranks; fled to recount the story to their fellows and enlarge upon it till the author of the calamity would not have recognized his own fearful work.

Without the least effort to secure and bury the dead—dreading, no doubt, that rocks might be thrown down upon them—the Indians withdrew and again held a council of war. Certainly there must be some other way to gain access to the cave, and if so, and they could discover it, and make a simultaneous entry at the two points, might they not hope to be successful?

The theory was a plausible one, and they hastened to see if it could not be put in practice by dispatching scouts to various points. These ranged over the mountain sides, but returned baffled—all but one, and when he descended it was like the shot from a gun. He whirled headlong hundreds of feet through the air—his quivering body lodged in a tree and was left suspended there for the carrion buzzards to tear piecemeal—to fester in the sun, and bleach in the rain, until the well-picked bones fell to the earth to be scattered by the cubs of the ever prowling wolves.

The cause of his fall none knew. Not one had seen the Scalp King, as he sprung with the agility of a cat, from the hollow tree, crept very near, and struck a full blow with his battle ax. He had gone again to watch their movements, and could not resist the temptation. It was another scalp to be credited to the dread account of revenge.

But though the Indians had met with such severe checks and disasters, they still sullenly resolved that the life of the white man should be at least a partial recompense for their loss, and various methods were proposed to be carried into effect and at the same time.

The one most favored was to smoke him out. Such a thing was not uncommon with beasts when driven to their dens in the rocks, and why should not the plan work with men?

To resolve was to put in execution, and with great labor, masses of inflammable matter were carried as secretly as possible to the point opposite the mouth of the cavern—rolled into balls tarred over, and arrows, around the heads of which dry moss, dipped in the resinous gums of the evergreen, were ignited and discharged until so great a flame and smoke arose as to even drive them back. Still they fed it for a time, until satisfied that nothing living could by any possibility remain within.

Then they waited until it was cool enough for them to venture across, and having framed

another bridge, were about to do so, when they saw the Scalp King standing carelessly near where the flames had been the fiercest, and heard his hoarse laugh of mockery as he said:

"If the intense fire of the great prairie could not consume me, how do you think your feeble blaze of bark and splinters would do so? Fire has no power to harm me, and your arrows are stingless."

The latter was a point they were at least determined to prove, and the shafts rattled against the rocks like shot. That numbers must have hit him they would have testified, though nothing could be proved, for he had immediately disappeared. And they neither saw nor heard anything of him again until a scout came riding up, with his panting steed lashed to foam, from the direction of the encampment, bringing the sad intelligence that the Scalp King had been there and left behind a trail of blood!

How could such a thing be possible?

They would not believe the evidence of one of their own race—would not believe their ears, and climbed the rocks in mad haste to learn how he had got away. And a very brief examination appeared to satisfy them. The solution was tangible so far as it went. The bridge—the one of his own construction—was down; he had certainly crossed over it, and why could they not do the same? They seemed to forget for the moment that he was flesh and blood, and they must have seen him when he was riding away—thought not of any secret passage—dreamed only of exploring the cave.

To do this all had more of curiosity than of caution. With their terrible enemy afar, they fancied no danger could come to them, and after a very cursory examination, a half score crowded upon the bridge—crowded forward—reached the middle, when it snapped in twain as if built of straw, and all who had gained a footing, were dashed down upon the mangled bodies of those who had preceded them.

Collected again in their camp upon the plain, the now thoroughly astounded Indians saw with a shudder that the Scalp King was standing upon the rocks above watching further their proceedings! It was too much for their superstitious souls, and with howls of baffled rage and fear they fled homeward.

CHAPTER X.

THE BEAUTIFUL TEMPTER.

FOR some time after the wild and bloody episode of the mountain, the Scalp King was seen no more by the Indians in that portion of the country.

Winter had settled down with its rigor; the snow was piled deep and the streams fettered with ice. There came murmurs from the southward, where the great Pe-boan (Winter Spirit) had less of power, of murders and scalping done by a single hand, and the wretched children of the prairie blessed the Manitou that his fiery wrath had been turned away from them.

Who it was that thus carried destruction into the ranks of their brethren of the south they did not for a moment doubt. There could not be two such men—could not be two such horses! But, with the graves covered deeply—hidden from their sight by the snow, and with months of tranquillity, something of their former manhood returned, though they had never ventured but once again to explore (to them) the fatal cavern.

A few of the boldest had attempted this and had returned in hot haste and with faces telling of fear. Even when they had quietly effected a crossing—when they had become convinced by listening that no creature was near, a terrible sound was heard within—a dark form was seen rushing toward them, with eyes of flame, and they knew that the ghost of the Scalp King was yet present.

This was enough for all time. The idea that a bear might have taken up his winter's quarters there was beyond their comprehension—skillful hunters though they might be—for far had become all-powerful and they could see nothing save through its darkly torturing lenses.

So the winter melted away in quietness and the birds began to return; the trees to put on their summer dress and the many-hued flowers to mosaic the fresh grass of the prairies. Then all were startled again by the return of their enemy, whose vengeance it appeared nothing would glut. His reappearance was heralded in a way that marked the man.

Waking from their slumbers one morning in spring, those first abroad started back in dismay as they saw a line of scalps drawn entirely around their little village! None stopped to count them—it would have been beyond their ability to do so, but they told of great slaughter

done somewhere—told far more forcibly than words could have done the fate that awaited them.

Then a universal wailing might have been heard. Then a cry of lamentation rung through the land. They almost called upon the mountains to fall upon and hide them from the undying hate—the whirlwind of wrath that so steadily swept over them. But this brought nothing of relief, and silently and in little bodies they turned their backs upon the homes of their fathers, sought other tribes, longing to become absorbed in them, only to be driven forth as things accursed—driven back to their fate!

They were mistaken, however, in the idea that haunted the Scalp King. Against that portion of the tribe he had no more of vengeance than any other. His enmity was against all. Whenever he saw an Indian, there he saw food meet for slaughter. But these had been the first that he had found—habit had somewhat fixed him to the locality, and here he lingered the most, as he had craftily planned his retreats and means of escape.

And all other things falling, the red men sought to disarm him by gifts, by promises to perform any thing he might wish them to do—by making him a king indeed, and becoming his slaves—by laying down all their treasures at his feet, and constituting him sole lawgiver.

This was a plan that had been often discussed, but vainly attempted to be carried into effect. Who would be bold enough to go, as it were, up to the mouth of a cannon—to place their heads in the jaws of an enraged lion—to give themselves up to be scalped? From such a foolhardy undertaking every one shrunk. Still the idea was never entirely abandoned, and after weeks of reflection it was decided that a girl of the tribe should be the messenger, and if also a victim, it was but a woman lost, and that counted but little in their estimation.

To single her out was not difficult. As the great majority of the females of the Indian race have but little of attractiveness, so are there rare instances of the most marked beauty—forms and faces—notwithstanding the bronzed skin, that their more cultivated sisters might well envy.

And such was Ne-ges-i-gook, or the Northern Light.

Scarcely more than in her sixteenth year, she was straight as a hemlock—tall, with a figure flexible and graceful—rounded by exercise in the open air, and undwarfed by the mysteries of fashion—eyes soft as those of the fawn—skin that had but little of the blackness of that of her people, and shone as pure bronze in the sunlight—small hands and feet—step light as a mountain-cat—ears sharp and erect as those of a stag—a delicately-cut mouth, filled with teeth of snow—laughter like that of a mountain rill, and hair of matchless length and blackness. There was nothing of the usually prominent bones to mar the contour of her cheeks—nothing of harsh or brutal expression. In fact she seemed as much out of place in the company of warriors and wrinkled, croaking squaws as a dove would have been in a nest of hawks, or the antelope's fawn in the den of snarling wolves.

But for all this soft and graceful manner, the blood of the long line of chieftains that ran in her veins had given to her a heart of fire, and when roused to action she could be as firm, and feared death as little, as the bravest brave.

Once selected to perform the dangerous task, of seeking the stronghold of the Scalp King, she could not shrink, and after many and earnest prayers to the Great Manitou, she arranged for the journey with all the love of display inherent in her sex—dressed herself in the gayest attire—twined the freshest of flowers in her carefully-braided and perfumed hair—put the most curiously-embroidered moccasins upon her feet—strung crimson wampum around her neck—encircled her bare arms and ankles with rings of silver—put on her skirt and leggings of snowy doe-skin, fringed with scarlet feathers, and made the heart of many a young warrior throb with pity and love as she lightly sprung upon a pony and dashed away to find him who had sworn to spare no one of her race from indiscriminate slaughter.

A fairer child of the prairies and wildwood never could have met the gaze of any man. Never was there one so calculated to bow the heart, and as if conscious of her beauty and her power to charm, she had almost willingly accepted the mission, and gayly (at least in appearance) rode forward to—what? The hundreds who watched her with the most intense anxiety could only have murmured—death!

But for all her high resolutions—for all her inherited bravery—for all the proud display of

charms, that would have driven a red-skinned lover mad with jealousy—for all her determination, she showed something of cowardice as she drew near to the fatal spot—as the cliffs rose up before her—the dark valley had to be traversed, where so many of her race had found death, and the full force of what she had undertaken burst upon her.

And this grew upon her with every foot that was traveled, and her way up the mountain-side was like that of a snail. And when she at last reached the point opposite to the mouth of the cave, she sunk in terror and could only falter out in the most feeble of accents:

"Pale-face!"

"Who calls? Who dare come hither?" was answered, but more like the howl of a wild beast than sounds coming from the lips of man.

"Will the pale-face look?"

"My look is death!"

"Even the wolf has been known to spare the lamb, and the serpent the young bird."

"Who and what are you?"

"A girl. I come to ask favors of the pale-face."

"Go hence, if anything of the blood of the white man runs in your veins. If the red, it would have been far better for you to have tempted the mercy of the panther when her cubs have been stolen away and are shrieking in pain."

Much as she had nerved herself yet she could not repress a scream of terror as he stalked from the depths of the cavern and stood leaning upon his battle-ax before her—for never before had she gazed upon his face.

And that face was one that once seen would never be forgotten! The life he had led, and the feelings he had indulged in had hardened it—had apparently utterly crushed out every vestige of pity. There was a terrible light burning in his eyes, that she could only compare to that of some tortured and seeking to be revenged brute. His beard was long and hung upon his breast, his hair rested low down upon his shoulders, and was strangely streaked with white locks. His skin was bronzed by sun and wind to almost the hue of her arm. His dress was of the skins of bear and wolf with the hair still clinging to them. His head was bare, save a blood-red scarf that was tied around it and hung behind, and gave an additional fierceness to his features. Constant exertion had given greater breadth to his frame, and his garments made him look even more of a giant than he really was.

But if the quivering girl was astonished, even so was he. When his eyes first rested upon her he staggered back like one who has received a heavy blow—staggered against the wall of rock, and remained panting for breath. A girl—one of the accursed race daring to come into his very stronghold—daring to call upon him to come and see her! It was too monstrous for belief, and the heavy gore-stained ax he had brought to instantly crush out life, dropped from his hand as if it had suddenly been paralyzed.

"An—Indian—girl!"

The words dropped from his lips as if weighed down with lead, and the wonder in his eyes steadily increased. Had it been a thousand warriors he would not have been as sorely astonished. But this feeble, trusting girl appeared to rob him of all power to do her injury, and sinking down upon an outcropping rock, he rested his elbows upon his knees and his head upon his hands, and gazed as if magnetized by the intent and yet pleading look of her large and lustrous eyes.

A quiet smile played as swift as summer lightning over the face of the girl, and she could scarcely restrain her impulse to speak. But, the habit of years and of her race had taught her reticence, and she calmly waited the issue of that strange meeting.

And speechless he gazed at her for some time—gazed with his entire soul beaming from his eyes—looked at her as one might have done at some startlingly beautiful serpent. Then his lips slowly parted, and more as if speaking to himself than conscious of the presence of another, he repeated, with a burst of genuine and enthusiastic feeling:

"Very beautiful!"

Again the swift smile played for a moment over the face of the girl. It was not in the nature of woman to refuse such a tribute from such a source, and extending her hands, she whispered in the most enticing manner:

"Will the pale-face come?"

Seemingly unconscious of what he was doing, the man lowered his bridge—crossed and seated himself at a little distance from her—

still keeping his eyes fixed upon her face—still drinking in as it were her wondrous beauty, enhanced by her dress and ornaments, and the picturesque surroundings, and his long and bitter self-expatriation from all the attractions of society.

"The pale-face is very lonely," continued the crafty girl, in a low, soft voice, as if fearing to break the spell she saw he was laboring under, and of which she flattered herself she was the motive power.

"Very—very beautiful," he repeated again as if he had not heard her words, and his mind was wandering to other scenes—as was indeed the case.

"He has no one to dress his venison and bathe his head when he comes home tired from the hunt—no one to love him."

"Love is dead!" he answered, sternly, and then his mind wandered again from the subject, and he resumed his scrutiny—raised her hand within his own, toyed, almost, with her long black hair, and seemed entirely absorbed in tracing the evidences of loveliness.

"Love never dies," she continued, in the same thrilling whisper. "It may sleep, but there is no grave for it while life lasts."

"Where did you come from?" he questioned suddenly.

"From the direction of the setting sun. But why does the pale-face live here alone, like the great bear of the mountain? Why does he not go back to his people?"

"He has no people—none. The wilderness is now his home, and the one purpose of his life is—"

"Hush! Hark!"

She had watched, was watching, him very closely, and was not long in determining that his mind was unsettled, and, as soon as the fitful, wild light of insanity began to glitter in his eyes—as soon as his actions threatened to be violent, she pressed her fingers warmly upon his hand, and sung one of the simple and sad love-songs, which, with the exception of those of war, comprise the entire music of her race.

Its effect was magical. He sunk back again, and the eye-lids drooped before her burning gaze. And without the least teaching in the subtle art of mesmerism, save such as a wildling of nature might have—without the slightest instruction from any who have studied and profess to know the mysteries of the mysterious power, she passed her hand slowly, tenderly up his arm, and permitted it to rest amid the heavy masses of his hair.

In an instant the never-to-be-crushed-out treachery of her savage nature flashed a plan through her brain which, if successful, would obviate all the necessity of humbling her proud soul or that of her nation, and she cunningly worked to increase her power over him—to bind him as a slave to her charms—to lead him at length where he would fall an easy prey to the warriors who madly thirsted for his blood.

If he was a Samson, she became a Delilah, and lured him by all the arts of coquettish and plotting womanhood to his fall.

She saw that the very first touch of her hand had thrilled him—saw that he willingly yielded to her caresses, and constantly though slowly increased them; nestled against him; permitted her soft cheek to touch his and her warm breath to fan it. And she kept his mind employed in a double sense, for when one song was finished another followed, and then she talked to him as if they had long been the warmest friends.

And never was man tempted by a beautiful, warm-blooded girl with greater art. She never touched upon, but drew his thoughts away from himself to her, and endeavored to make him feel that he was entirely dependent upon her for happiness. Still there were times when he would suddenly break away from her endearments—when his long-cherished revenge would flash through his brain with all the burning strength and vividness of lightning, and she sighed to see the chains she believed she had woven strongly, burst through as easily as if they had been formed of the mist of the morning.

And at such times he would hold her sternly at a distance; seek to recall the reason of her being there; seek to fathom the mystery as to who she was and why he did not bury his knife in her heart or hurl her bodily into the yawning gulf.

Then she feared his fire-flashing eyes; the black frown that shrouded his face as a thunder-cloud; his immense strength; drew back from him in alarm, and seeing no safety save in the same line of action she had hitherto followed, endeavored to win him back to quietness.

Yet a single word would arouse him, and the power of her magnetic influence began to fade before his stronger organization and more mighty will. She saw that, if successful, it must not be very long delayed, and lavished still more and warmer caresses upon him, and tempted him with honeyed words to go with her.

And more than once he was upon the point of doing so. Had he done it, he would never have taken scalp again, for, hidden at the foot of the mountain were half a dozen armed braves, who had secretly followed to see that she did not deceive them, but faithfully executed her commission.

With the failure of her softening influences came another and fearful trial to her strength of heart, brain and nerve—one such as none of her sex and age could have endured except trained in such a rough school and taught to conceal (when pleased so to do) every emotion and believe that a death of torture was a death of honor.

For a brief time he had been looking away from her face, had been released from the power of her eyes, had not been hearkening to the siren voice. The stamping of his horse recalled him from dreamland, and all his misery and all the minutiae of his oath came back with the most startling distinctness. Then the temptress faded quickly from memory so far as being other than one of a tribe of enemies—as one of a number who had done him the most grievous of wrongs, and turning swiftly around, he crushed the flesh of her arm in his grasp of iron, and fairly hissed from lips purple with anger:

"You are an Indian!"

"I am a helpless woman!"

"It was some—God alone knows how many—of your accursed, thrice accursed race that made my home desolate, and my heart a hell! Why should not your scalp follow the others?"

"Because you dare not take it!" she replied, assuming a boldness she was far from feeling.

"Why?"

"I came to seek you as a friend—came to seek you unarmed. See! not a single weapon—not even a knife. And you would not for all the wealth of your nation stain your hands in the blood of one who thus trusted you."

"By the light of heaven, you are brave."

"And therefore demand your respect."

"Know ye not that I have never yet spared one of your people?"

"I know you have scattered innocent scalps over the earth thick as snow-flakes in the freezing moon, and it was for this I came to see you—ay, even ventured here unarmed and alone."

The word "alone" recalled him to the sense of danger, and, without the slightest warning, he picked her up in his powerful arms and darted upon the bridge—pausing for a moment in the center. Had she exhibited the least signs of fear he would certainly have dashed her down to the bottom as others had gone before her. But with a mighty effort she refrained from screams—remained passive—was carried into the cave—the bridge was withdrawn, he seated himself in front of her so as to watch her every emotion, and continued:

"Tell me why you came here?"

"To beg of you to spare my race."

"Did they spare mine? Is there a single one left?"

"Whatever your wrongs, they have been deeply avenged."

"But I swore never to know rest while life lasted."

"The Manitou will turn such an oath into a curse. Let the pale-face listen. He has spilled rivers of blood. The prairies and woods are stained with it. Desolation is in the wigwams of my people. The old men are bowed down to the very grave—the women tremble even when they hear the voice of the night-wind, and the little papposes hide their heads for fear. The hunters dare not go out in search of game, and starvation is staring them in the face. Their brothers have driven them from them, and they have no place of habitation. The scalps he has taken are as the drops of morning dew, and the red-man shuns the face of the sun and crouches shivering in the darkness."

She had arisen and was standing before him with her eyes eloquent with tears. Her cheeks were flushed, her bosom panting—her beauty a hundredfold enhanced. He gazed upon her and was awed. Something of the old magnetic influence returned, and taking her hand he drew her down again to a seat by his side and asked, in an altered voice:

"What will the red-men do if I turn my back forever upon them and their haunts?"

"Anything."

"And should I stay, even go and live among them and be their friend?"

"They will make you the great king of the nation."

He paused, bent his head upon his hands, and was lost in reflection for a time. Then again he asked, looking rather to her eyes than her lips for an answer:

"What will you do?"

"I will teach him the ways of peace—will rock his aching head in my arms—will be to him a sister. Oh! for the love of the Manitou, come with me. Leave this dreadful cave, and come and dwell in the pure air and the blessed sunshine."

"I will go—and talk with your warriors."

She waited to hear no more, flung her arms around his neck, kissed him in a manner so passionate as to send all the blood surging to his heart, and gently dragged him forward. Yet for all the show of gratified love, there was a dangerous compression of her lips—a mental resolve that as soon as she was herself in safety she would snatch the sharp knife from his belt, and let out his heart's blood before he should escape.

It was true Indian treachery, cunningly worked out, as well as the noble and justifiable resolve of a woman to free her nation from the most dangerous enemy it had ever known.

The bridge was dropped and crossed. He would have returned and taken his horse with him, but she painted in fitting words the foolishness of so doing—told him that, after he had consulted with the elders of the tribe he could return—that it was but a little distance to the spot whence she could summon them.

The temptress was triumphant!

He listened to her as he perhaps had never before done to woman—stepped forward with her clinging fondly to his arm—then paused and weaving her within his embrace, and looking down into the face that was upturned to him beaming with smiles, and yet once more questioned:

"What will you do for me?"

"Anything—everything."

"Everything? What do you mean by that?"

"I will be your sweetheart—wife—"

"Great God of heaven!"

That single word had banished all she had before done—set his brain whirling—his soul thirsting for blood—his oath burning before his eyes as if written in letters of flame. He threw her wildly from him, called down the lightning to blind and to blast—tore the battle-axe from his belt, and would have stricken her down had not her movements been as swift as his own.

The heavy, stone-headed weapon was splintered to fragments as it whirled harmlessly over her head and struck the rocks, and as she gained her horse and rode swiftly away she heard the mountain ringing with his screams of vengeance and horrid laughter.

She had utterly failed, even when the most certain of having accomplished her mission, and nothing would ever again tempt her within reach of the powerful arm of the Scalp King. Far sooner would she have hunted out the winter-starved bear and braved his wrath.

The story she told did much to increase the terror of her people, and make the name and fame of their enemy ring through the length and breadth of the land.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER BAY.

THE terrible temptation through which he had passed—the revulsion in feeling consequent upon it—the furious wrath—the images of the dead wife and children that once more were recalled and haunted him with the most appalling power, caused such a paroxysm of insanity as he had never before known—was longer in duration and more dangerous in its consequences.

For weeks existence to the wretched man could scarcely have been called life, and when his natural energies and strong constitution rallied and asserted their sway, and he became physically a man again, it was with every desire and object but one entirely blotted from his brain.

But, with all his powers concentrated upon that sole purpose, he became still more crafty—still more dangerous to the Indians—tracked them as the wolves track a wounded deer—gave no warning of his coming—struck a savage blow and was away again. It was in vain they followed. His horse could easily distance their swiftest, and while they were still struggling behind, he was dashing up the rocks, and long before they could reach the gulf he had to cross,

was laughing triumphantly within the depths of the cavern, or raining down shots and huge rocks from above upon them in a manner that quickly drove them back.

It was in vain, too, that they attempted to conceal themselves and shoot him down from an ambush on the opposite side of the chasm. He appeared to have some secret method of being warned of their presence—to know exactly the moment of their coming and departure, and if they remained long would disappear and ride away by some path they could not discover.

But desperation at last drove them to retaliation. If the pale-face could thus mow down their ranks even as their sickles did the grass of the prairie, why could not they do the same? Perchance the great Manitou was angry with them for thus permitting the Jee-by-e-nick-unah (our Milky Way—to them the "path of ghosts") to be nightly thronged with unrevenged spirits, and that when they again proved themselves to be men he would smile upon them and withdraw the curse that appeared to have fallen—nay, even give them the Scalp King for torture.

If so, the means to attain this end were not lacking, and armed bands departed secretly in all directions, and many a settler's home upon the frontier blazed in the midnight, and many a dying groan was heard, and many a scalp and prisoner taken to be offered up to the dread power of their blood-loving Manitou of war.

And it seemed as if they had at last struck the key-note of success. Their hitherto taunting brethren began to smile upon them again—to lend them a helping hand—to furnish them with the thews and sinews of war, and the Scalp-King had (upon several occasions) barely escaped from their now well organized expeditions against him. With this dawning of a brighter day to them, after so long a night of darkness, came not only the longing but the determination to take him alive, and show to all the world that they were yet mighty in war and could propitiate the Great Spirit by such an offering as never before had been slain upon any altar.

Craftily their preparations were made, secretly their councils held. The bravest warriors and the most cunning scouts enlisted—even the women were sent out as spies. A vast territory was surrounded, and they waited impatiently until the enemy should appear and the preconcerted signal of attack be given.

It came upon just such a day as they would have prayed for—came when the sun was shining brightly—the air clear from smoke—the wind still and they could see for a long distance.

The nearest scouts saw the Scalp King quietly ride away from his mountain home, and immediately a little band rushed to the cave and took possession of it, while others passed word along the line, and the skulkers in the prairie-grass fairly rattled their weapons for joy, and those in the timber descended from their look-out in the topmost branches of the trees and fixed their arrows upon the strings and loosened their knives in their belts and felt of the edge of their tomahawks.

Fully five hundred armed warriors were upon the watch—every inch of the prairie upon which he had ridden was guarded, and if he could then escape he must indeed be or be protected by the evil spirit!

Still he rode forward, as if unconscious of danger—rode with his head bowed low upon his breast—with his weapons as carelessly placed as if the country contained none for him but friends. And when near the middle of the open prairie he drew the rein, and raising himself until he could stand upon the back of his horse, he looked upon every side, the Indians knew that he had discovered something suspicious, and they answered by the most discordant yells.

If he had failed to hear them he would have been deaf to the loudest peals of thunder; yet it appeared to make no impression upon him. He quietly resumed his seat, and again rode leisurely forward—rode toward a thicket where an unusually large body had concealed themselves. But when within arrow-shot he wheeled as suddenly as an affrighted deer and dashed away.

It was but as the hunter-driven buffalo. Whichever way he turned a new danger presented itself—a new band of warriors rose to confront him. Almost as the eagle his swift and powerful horse flew around the contracting circle, and the ambushed enemies saw, with a thrill of joy, that after a time he would outrun his strength, and the rider would be comparatively helpless.

That time appeared to come at last. With panting flanks—with drooping head—quivering tail—covered with foam—reeking with sweat—the horse stopped, and the rider apparently endeavored to urge him forward. The watching Indians saw his every motion, and gloried that now both horse and man were at their mercy, and the signal was given to draw still closer.

The eyes of the Scalp King flashed with vindictive hate and determination, and his deep drawn breath told of the most powerful emotions. If his last battle it should be one long to be remembered. He knotted the reins around the neck of his horse—took his club in one hand and pistol in the other—watched how near his enemies were gathering—but still made no effort to escape. He was like a stag at bay, and woe to any that should come within the reach of his horns!

And nothing saved him even then but the inflexible rule that had been established that he was to be taken unharmed—that no warrior was to shoot him down from the distance, but all with a grand rush close around, and drag him to the ground and pinion him by their combined efforts.

The plan was a good one, and why should it not succeed with every thing in their favor?

They still crept nearer. Still he waited until he could almost see the fiery sparkling of their eyes. Then, as with a voice of thunder, he shouted his battle-cry, and, as an arrow flies from a strongly-twanged bow-string, even so his horse sprung forward and dashed into their ranks. Into—through them as the enraged buffalo-bull tosses aside the miserable little wolves of the prairie, when numbers has made them overbold and they dispute his way!

Into their ranks—through them! Those who threw themselves upon and clung to him were beaten down by his heavy club or fell pierced by bullets—were stamped by the maddened horse, or slain by the rider, and the rest saw him resistlessly ride on. Then came shouts of baffled vengeance; every bow was discharged, and the arrows fell around him thick as hail as they mounted and followed, making the earth tremble beneath their footsteps, and the sky quiver with their savage yells.

Would he turn to the mountain cave? If so, his doom was fixed, and not to be questioned. Would he break away to south? Then there was no escape from a horrible death. Every pass was guarded. The only open one led to a point of rocks that was cut in twain by a deep, broad gulf—the path of a mountain torrent, that nothing living could leap. And would he, in his desperation attempt it? No sane man would ever dream of such a thing.

Ah! they knew nothing even as yet of the rider—nothing of the confidence he had in his horse. Waving them to follow, he still rode on—the long ends of the blood-red scarf he wore around his head stream out behind as twin banners of defiance—his mighty weapon whirled around as light as a reed—his knees pressed firmly against the sides of his horse—one hand patting the arched and glossy neck, and his voice encouraging him.

Then those who could see distinctly held their breath in awe!

He drew still nearer—nearer to the fearful gulf almost as the lightning flies—reached the summit of the rocks—bent down to the streaming mane, and then, like a thunderbolt, the black horse was seen to rush through the air—then was lost to their sight!

Had he made the matchless leap? Had he fallen to the bottom, to be found with his maddened rider crushed to a gory mass upon the jagged stones at the bottom?

It would have required hours of travel to go around and solve the mystery. Still it must be known, and the hands collected for that purpose. But before their object could be accomplished, a wounded few of those who had guarded the cave came straggling back, telling a tale of horror—how their enemy had sprung out upon them from the solid rock and beaten out the brains of all but themselves.

Then all crept back to their wigwams in shuddering fear, and whispered from pale and trembling lips:

"He is indeed Kosanoun Weenikury—the King of Scalps!"

CHAPTER XII.

AFTER THE BATTLE.

WITH his affrighted enemies driven before him as chaff before the wind, or lying mangled in death, the Scalp King closed the secret opening through which he had sprung upon them—cleared the floor of the dead bodies by throwing them down into the pit in front, and then went

to the spot where he had hidden his faithful horse, returned with and gave him every possible attention.

And he needed something of the same treatment himself, for the wounds he had received, though not immediately dangerous, were numerous, and the heads of several arrows had pierced through his thick garments and fastened themselves in the flesh. These had caused the blood to flow freely, and the drain upon his system was more than he had any idea of, and had saturated his garments until they looked as if dyed crimson. His face, too, was sorely scratched, and his hair and long beard clotted with gore. Indeed, a more ghastly sight could not have been produced, even if purposely got up, and had a glass been presented to him, he would have started back with horror.

But to his wounds (save to tear away the arrow-heads) he gave not the slightest attention—nor even to the stopping of blood. He threw himself upon the flinty floor of the cavern and soon was slumbering heavily—slumbered until long into the night, and then arose, and with a reeling brain and unsteady step, crawled out into the refreshing night-air and sat watching the stars until they had "winked themselves out," and the glories of the coming day were stealing through the gates of the East.

The sight calmed him. He looked abroad over the wide expanse of prairie, and the universal stillness soothed his troubled spirit. He leaned back against the rock, and soon again the poppy-leaves fell around—the ivory portals were swung wide open and he was wandering in the land of blessed dreams—so blessed, so tranquil, that he knew nothing of the coming of armed men upon the opposite side of the chasm—nothing of the cry of intense anguish that burst from the lips of Guy Oliver as he turned from the hideous scene to a companion, and exclaimed:

"May God have mercy upon him! He is dead—looks as if he had been skinned alive. At last the accursed red-skins have been too much even for him, and have placed his body there to mock and affright any one who might come. By Heaven! this adds to my already deep-seated vengeance, and soon I shall have as great a score to wipe out as he did. Poor Roger! I came for your assistance and find you need mine—the very last kind offices that man can give to man."

"But he may not be dead. I fancy I can still see him breathing," was the suggestion of one of his friends.

"Breathing? What are you talking about? A man who looks as if he had been literally boiled in blood to be breathing? And yet I believe you may be right," he continued, after a closer examination. "Oh! for some means to get across to him."

"Suppose you try and call him. He may not be so far gone that he can not hear and recognize your voice."

"Roger, Roger Bennett!"

The woods rung with the words—they startled the wolves and buzzards from their horrid feast in the depths below, but failed to arouse the sleeper. Again and yet again they were repeated without any good result, and the young physician and his comrades were about to seek for some means to get over to him when he suddenly started to his feet—rubbed his hands over his eyes and murmured in a broken voice:

"Hark! The dead are calling."

"No, it is the living, old friend. Do you not know me?"

In an instant the ever-ready pistols were drawn from his belt, cocked, raised, sighted and fired as they drew back in alarm. No, not fired. He had failed to load them after his desperate encounter and miraculous escape, and to that forgetfulness some of their number owed their lives. With a curse he dashed them down, and tearing a huge stone from its rocky bed was about to hurl it, when the physician again stood forth in plain view and hailed him.

"Roger Bennett, do you not know me, Guy Oliver?"

The stone dropped from the hands that held it and went crashing down into the depths below; the man himself almost fell and followed it, but clutching to a firm support he looked with a face that was the picture of amazement, and gasped out:

"Guy."

"Yes, it is I, old friend. Down with your bridge, and let me across."

"Guy—let me think. I cannot—cannot remember."

"Look well at my face."

"Yes—yes—I see. You are—"

"A doctor," was the impatient interruption. "But do not keep me waiting. I have much to tell you."

"Yes—yes—a doctor?"

It was some time before Oliver could persuade him to do as he wished. The clouds were thick around the brain of the self-doomed man—the past very indistinct—almost like a dream. But, at length, a little of light entered; he mechanically lowered the crossing, staggered toward his friend, and, with a cry of joy, fell fainting upon his neck.

To strip off his garments, get water brought and wash and dress his wounds, was but short work for the young physician. Brief as his border life had been, he had more than once been called upon to patch up humanity after the knives and hatchets of the Indians had been at work, and he was rejoiced to find a job of so little difficulty—no bones to set, no bullets to extract.

"His scalp is all right," he said, with a sickly effort at a smile, "and I wish his brain was."

But there was nothing of the old-time fire and devil-may-care jollity about Guy Oliver. His face told of sorrow and his every motion was of anxiety.

"He is the only man," he exclaimed to his companions, "whom I know of that can do us any good in this undertaking, and we must nurse him to health and strength with all possible speed."

"And reason?"

"That will never fully return; will at last be blotted out entirely, I very much fear."

"And should he fail you, Guy?"

"Then Heaven have mercy upon me; I believe I shall go mad, too."

For two days he nursed and ministered to Roger Bennett as if he had been dear to him as a brother, and the beneficial results of the treatment became apparent. Still, he did not as yet dare to mention the object of his visit, though they talked upon other subjects, and it was not until twenty-four hours later that anything was said of it and then it was in reply to the direct question:

"What brought you here, Guy?"

"Do you remember the last words you said when I was here before?"

"No; nothing."

"You said, wait until my turn came and then I would see, or something of the kind."

"Well?"

"My turn has come!"

"What do you mean?"

"The accursed Indians have stolen away one who is a thousand-fold dearer than life."

"Not your—your—" and the depleted form of the Scalp King trembled so violently that he could not finish the sentence.

"No, Roger, not as yet my—the word is too sacred with you to mention—but soon was to be."

"The Indians carried her away?"

"Yes."

"And have not murdered or scalped her?"

"I hope and believe not."

"For that you may thank God—thank Him that there are neither graves in the prairie nor in your heart."

"My poor friend, will time never shed its healing influences over you?"

"Never! But"—and the mighty effort at self-control was terrible to look upon—"but let us talk of yourself."

"You know many of the tribes?"

"All within a hundred miles. There is not one in whose wigwams you will not find blackened faces; not one that will not tremble when he hears the tread of my horse or the sound of my voice."

"Then you can find my lost one?"

"If above the ground, yes."

"Listen, then, and I will tell you all."

It was the old sad tale; the one that has been and will be repeated again, and again, of midnight assault; burning of home; fiendish murder and fair prisoners carried away to be put to torture, or, what is still worse, to be kept in a captivity that every hour, to a sensitive mind, is far more bitter than a thousand deaths.

"Have you followed the trail?" asked the Scalp King, sternly, and yet beginning to become interested.

"To within a few miles of here."

"North or south?"

"Almost due west."

"Tell me so that I should know her."

Guy Oliver took a picture from his pocket and handed it to him. It was of a girl who could not have reached her twentieth year, with soft brown eyes and long brown hair, and, as Roger Bennett sat and gazed upon it,

tears, for the first time in many a long day, came into his eyes and rolled slowly down his grief-furrowed cheeks. Then he raised it to his lips and murmured fervently the name of: "Agnes."

The physician knew that he was reminded of his daughter—his eldest one—had often remarked the likeness between his lost love and the dead girl, and hoped something beneficial might arise from it. But there was nothing at the time to make him confident as to the result. The Scalp King handed him back the miniature with a heavy sigh, and then arose and began preparing his horse for departure.

"Where are you going?" questioned Oliver.

"To save—Agnes."

"We will go with you."

"I go alone. He who follows the Indians must do so with the silence, and swiftness, and certainty of a ghost."

"Then you would have been in just the condition if you had remained as we first found you," replied Oliver, with a smile he could not repress.

No notice was taken of the remark. The mind that had wavered from its balance had power to contain but one object at the same time within its scope, and, after repeated offers to accompany him and as many refusals, they saw the Scalp King lead his horse across the bridge; go slowly down the rocks; then mount and dash away at headlong speed.

But once out of their sight, his progress became much slower and his course was often changed; became as winding as that of a serpent and as still. And when near the camp of the Indians, he dismounted and crawled forward until he could see all that was transpiring within. It was evidently of far more interest than usual. There were sounds of revelry—of the most enthusiastic rejoicing.

He drew still nearer—raised himself slowly and stood so close to and so firmly against the trunk of a tree that a casual observer would have taken him for a part thereof, and saw a sight that would have driven Guy Oliver to distraction and made him rush wildly in—and lose his life.

CHAPTER XIII.

A LAMB AMONG WOLVES.

LIKE a living whirlwind the Indians had swept upon the homes of the settlers, fired their houses, shot down the men, and with a few exceptions, butchered and scalped the women and children, leaving desolation and ashes in their track, and swiftly returning to their camping-grounds upon some far-away stream or in the dense fastnesses of the forest.

But occasionally some girl who was more beautiful than the rest was saved from the indiscriminate slaughter by a chief who had taken a savage fancy for a white-skinned wife, or for torture when it was deemed that the Manitou was particularly angry with them, or unusual failure upon the trails of war or hunting was thought to make such a thing necessary.

This had been the case in their last sortie. Even when the dwelling, stacks and barns were aflame—when the cattle and horses were being driven off with the most hideous outcries—when the father and mother and sister and brother of Kate Armstrong were lying either dead or gasping in the last extremity—she had been torn from the hands of a young brave who had dragged her to her knees, wretched his brawny fingers in her wealth of nut-brown hair, and was whirling his knife to sunder the scalp from the bowed head.

Then, and even before she had time to realize her present safety, she had been carried to and thrown upon a horse, a warrior had leaped behind her, and she was carried away she knew not where.

When she awoke to a realizing sense of her situation, she was firmly bound to a post in the center of an Indian village—bound hand and foot—bound so that even the slightest movement was torture, and taunted by the squaws and little boys of the tribe with her helplessness—taunted, and would have been seriously wounded had not a warrior who stood intently watching their proceedings, sternly forbade when they carried the matter too far.

"The child of the pale-face," he said, "is reserved as a sacrifice to the Great Spirit, and nothing must be done to render her unfit for torture."

More dead than alive, the poor girl listened wildly to the words, and in the agony of the moment she raised her trembling voice and begged him to instantly kill her.

"The cry of the pale squaw is sweet music to the ear of the warrior, and will be still more to

the Manitou," was his reply. "Even now he is hearkening unto her."

In all ordinary circumstances Kate Armstrong was a brave girl—much more so than was common—was so by nature, and life upon the border had made her strongly marked in this particular. This, and the knowledge she had of the character of the red-men, taught her to assume a bravery she was very far from feeling, and she nerved herself and answered:

"Better take me back and crawl upon your knees for mercy. For every hair of my head that falls a warrior of your race will bite the dust."

"And the squaws and papposes?" he questioned.

"Will remain unharmed. My people do not make war upon women and children."

It was a bitter home thrust, and the Indian winced under it. His face grew black with frowns, and his hands involuntarily sought scalping-knife and tomahawk. Indeed, so great was his anger that the life of the girl trembled in the balance, and had not other chiefs, accompanied by the Medicine, arrived at the moment, she would have been stricken, brained, at his feet.

Her fate—not what it was to be, but the mode—was to be decided upon, and they had gathered to discuss the almost fiendish murder that was to be done. And she was to hear all—to be tortured in anticipation, for with even more than their customary brutality, every word of the conversation was made known to her, clearly interpreted, even forced upon her memory.

The usual pipe-smoking having been gone through with, one after another arose and stated his views with regard to the matter, but all were finally overruled by the Medicine, who claimed her as a sacrifice to the Great Spirit, whose officer he was upon the earth.

"She must perish on the altar," he said; "there is no other way to appease the wrath of the Great Spirit."

"By fire?"

"When the soul is gone out in torture, then her body must be entirely consumed and the ashes scattered to the winds. Ay, first must the blood be dried up, the heart be torn from the still living breast, the flesh crackle in the flames."

"Horror!" burst from the lips of the poor prisoner. "Oh, Heaven! must these things be? Are your hearts stone? Are ye fiends to thus condemn an innocent one to the most terrible torture?"

"Innocent?" was hurled back by a hundred tongues.

"Yes, innocent. How have I ever injured you?"

"How many of our people, just as innocent as you are, have fallen before the countless wrath of the Scalp King?"

The bare mention of the name caused all to look around in fear—look upon every side as if they expected to see him come stalking into the circle and carry their prisoner away before any could raise a hand to defend.

Had they but seen his face as he stood watching and listening to their proceedings—have seen the lines of almost devilish enmity and revenge that were struggling upon his face, they would have shrunk from further torture of the poor defenseless lamb—wolves that they were.

But fortunately for their peace of mind, they knew nothing of the near presence of their dreadful enemy, and still gloated upon the deeds of diabolical torture that were to be done.

"When shall the sacrifice be made?" asked the chief.

"To-morrow," answered the Medicine.

"Why wait until to-morrow? The hearts of our brothers are longing for torture. Even now the pale-face may be upon the trail and by to-morrow the Scalp King may find out what is going on and swoop down upon us from his den amid the rocks of the mountain."

"Not so. The warriors of the pale-face will not dare to follow the trail of the red-man until they have gathered in great numbers, and it will be moons before the Scalp King will mount his horse again."

"Why? How do you know?" were the eager questions.

"I was seated among the bones of the dead in the burial ground of our people, communing with the Great Spirit, when he returned from being hunted by the red warriors and was driven like a rat to his hole. His horse was as one who had run very far and could scarcely crawl along, and the rider was red with blood from head to foot as the berries of the summer in the autumn time. His head was bowed low and his lips tortured with pain. His face was scarred

as if he had been fighting with the sharp-clawed wild-cat, and his arms hung powerless by his side. No, the red-man need not fear him until his wounds have healed, even if he does not faint, famish and die in his den."

Though the story did not correspond with the report of the wounded men who had been driven from the cave and barely escaped with their lives, while their companions were slain, yet it was not noticed, or at least no comment was made upon it, and the chief asked yet again:

"Why wait until to-morrow?"

"Because the stars have sung it and the winds whispered it into my ears. To-morrow is the time when the dance of thanksgiving will be performed by the tribe for the breaking of the icy chains of the Frost King and the coming of Seeg-wun, the sweet spirit of spring."

"To-morrow, then, let it be."

"But will no other sacrifice appease the offended Manitou?" asked the chief who had saved the girl from death and brought her thither.

"None."

"He would have her fill his wigwam—become his wife."

"She must die!"

"He will give many gifts. Let the Medicine think. Is there nothing that can save her?"

"Nothing but the Scalp King and—"

"He is here!" thundered the man himself as he strode into the circle. "Here to take the place of yonder poor innocent girl. Let her go free and do with him as you will!"

For a few moments all were paralyzed, and taking advantage of it, he cut away the bonds from the girl, whistled to his horse, whispered a few words in her ears and turned the horse loose. Then he returned, placed his back against the post and calmly awaited their motions.

In an instant all awakened from their iron trance, sprung upon him in a body, and bound him as never before man was bound. And still he made no effort to escape—still smiled, until he saw the girl dragged back again. Then he raged as a caged lion and taunted them with treachery. But he soon commanded himself—saw how useless were his struggles—reserved his strength, and asked of the girl in her native tongue concerning the horse.

"He broke away from those who attempted to hold him—stamped some under his feet, and dashed swiftly away."

"Thank Heaven!"

"But what," she asked, "is to become of me? Am I to die the terrible death that has been decreed? You are a white man, and must be a friend."

"Far more than you know. I will save you, if I can."

They had no time for further conversation—were hurried away to different parts of the huge army bound and guarded—so as sacrificed together when the light of morning should again appear.

As for the horse, he had dashed homeward, and up the rocks at frantic speed, and when Guy Oliver rushed out to welcome back the Scalp King, they trembled with alarm as they saw that he was riderless and stained with fresh blood!

CHAPTER XV.

THE ALTAR OF SACRIFICE.

THE action of the Scalp King had very much astonished his enemies. They could not understand such self-sacrifice or the motive that could lead to such generosity, and no more calculated upon it than he had upon their treachery, though had he given the subject a thought he would have known that such would have been the result.

Had he sprung among them, battle-ax in hand, and attempted to free the girl, it would have been perfectly characteristic, and they would have comprehended in an instant all connected with it. But to do exactly the reverse, to come among them unarmed, to quietly offer himself as a substitute for a prisoner, and that one a girl, was altogether beyond their understanding, and long after he had been bound and rendered harmless they sat and gazed at him in wonder, and some even with marked admiration.

This was the case with the younger and unmarried squaws, and particularly with her who had gone as a messenger to him. Despite native treachery that had lured her to play the part she had, yet she could appreciate nobleness even in an enemy, and a thrill of almost pleasure shot through her frame as she saw that the one for whom she had ventured so much was fully worthy of it. Had she dared—had he been a common enemy—she would have exercised the undoubted prerogative of her sex (according to the laws of the red-man), claimed him for a husband, and thus removed him beyond the pale of death. Such things had been done before within her recollection, and no ill results to the squaw had followed from the vindictiveness of her people.

But the case was very different now. He was an

unusual enemy from any that had ever before been bound to the stake and condemned to the worst torture it was in their power to inflict, and she dared not do as her heart prompted; but, suppressing her enthusiasm, watched narrowly every one who drew near to him.

And in something the same situation, though from a different cause, were the warriors. They could not feel assured that the terrible Scalp King was in their power—that they had actually laid hands upon him—that he was rendered helpless by bonds—that they could calmly discuss his fate—that he would not disappear even while their eyes were fastened upon him. Indeed, none would have been surprised in the least if he had suddenly taken wings and flown away like a great bird—if the earth had swallowed him—if he had been transformed to a tree or stone.

They went to sleep resting upon their arms, save the few who were detailed as a watch, and when the midnight hour had come a terrible storm burst upon the village. The rain fell with all of deluge power, and the ground rocked and trembled as never had been known before. Of the power of the earthquake they knew nothing, and attributed the convulsion of nature entirely to the Scalp King, for when calm came again he had disappeared!

But the girl was still safe, and not a single warrior slept again—not an eye was closed until the light of morning came, and then they urged the Medicine to hasten the sacrifice.

To have refused would have been at the peril of his life, and, after the usual ceremonies, he consented, and led the way to the stone-built altar where more than one poor wretch had met his fate—had been sacrificed to the god of savage superstition.

Vain were her pleadings for mercy and shrieks for help. Such things were the sweetest music to their ears—torture was the dearest food to their brutal souls—blood what they grew fat upon.

Suffering from the trials she had already been forced to endure from hunger and thirst, from the cold night-wind and from storms, Kate Armstrong was in a condition to have excited pity even in a heart of stone, but her captors made light of all.

With her hands still fettered, she was forced along over the sharp, ragged stones, through the tangled woods—up the steep hillside, and at length stood upon the summit, by the side of the altar.

Then indeed her heart sunk within her and she prayed that death might come swiftly. But even with her entreaties, thoughts of her lover intruded themselves, and she wondered if he too had been swallowed up in the general massacre, or, if alive, was following her and would come—too late!

But, brief was the time intended to be given her for thought. Evidently the Indians feared the task they had undertaken and were anxious to get through with it in the most summary manner. It was the Scalp King they dreaded, who had been taken away from them in a whirlwind and might reappear in the lightning.

The old Medicine, however, was in no humor to have any of the formalities of the occasion neglected, to be robbed of a single iota of the glory. His part must be played to the uttermost, and robed in all the terrible regalia of his calling, he strutted about, intoxicated with his own importance, and the chiefs appealed to him in vain to dispense with a portion of the ceremony, and put the girl at once to the torture.

"The Great Spirit would be offended," he said, "if I were to permit such a sacrifice as a shield for his purposes. But, why should ye hasten? What have ye to fear? Will not the Manitou protect you? Is it the Scalp King ye stand in awe of?"

Their faces told that he had fathomed the secret of their haste, and with a mocking laugh and wild gesticulation he continued:

"Do ye not know that the Evil Spirit carried him away in flame and smoke? Do ye not know that he can never harm the red-man again? But, even if he should be living, how can he injure you? You can see around for miles, and no one can come near without your knowledge."

There was sense in this and their minds became somewhat eased and permitted him to go through his senseless mummary without further grumbling. And at length they were finished—the preparations for torture were commenced in earnest and her cries for mercy might have been heard for miles around.

But who could possibly come to her assistance? Certainly none of earth, and the red fiends laughed and leaped for joy, and the Medicine jingled his bells and rattled his serpent-skins in the very excess of enjoyment.

To finish her more to their mind, the hands of the fair prisoner were momentarily released, and swift as thought she dropped upon her knees and raising them, clasped, poured forth her very heart in prayer.

"Ay, call upon your Manitou!" taunted the Medicine, "and see if he will come."

"God have pity upon me—save me," burst from her agonized lips.

"Call again!"

"Spare me! Oh! holy angels have mercy upon me!"

"Bind her until she screams still louder!" was the command of the leader of the red devils.

A dozen hands were rudely laid upon the shrinking form of the girl, marveling at the dazzling whiteness of her skin as it was exposed by the disarrangement of the dress upon her shoulder. And as they would have still further tore it away she struggled madly for freedom—spat in their faces and struck the foremost with her little clenched hand until he quailed. Outraged modesty had for the moment given her the strength of a man and the courage of a lioness.

But all her efforts were useless. Her limbs and hands were fettered, and she was laid upon the huge stone altar.

"Now let the fire be prepared!"

Dry bark, the resinous splinters of the pine and hemlock—fine moss—pitchy knobs—everything that could produce the most intense flame were near at hand and were piled around her until she looked as if laid in a huge basket.

"God have mercy!"

Her latest prayer rung out as a mockery. It could only reach the ears of fiends on earth, no matter what it might have done beyond, and in the wild struggle that gave it utterance, she appeared to have lost all of strength, for not another sound escaped her lips.

"She is dead!" groaned the Medicine-man, starting back in horror at the result of his damning deeds.

But it was not so. He looked again, and saw to his intense relief that she had neither died nor fainted, and was astonished at the change. The eyes that had before quailed shot forth brilliant rays; the cheeks that had been ashy were flushed; the mobile lips that had been as chalk were carmine.

"Fire the pile!"

A dozen torches were lighted, waved in the air to increase their burning, and they sprung forward to execute the will of the Medicine and their own hearts, but paused as suddenly as if turned to stone.

The prisoner had entirely disappeared. Above the top of the combustibles were ranged a dozen rifles, and from a pair of brazen lips, so loud and strong was the utterance, again came the mandate of:

"FIRE!"

The rifles belched forth their deadly contents, the Indians were driven back, fled appalled, and from the very center of the pile of stone sprung forth the Scalp King, followed by Guy Oliver and his friends, loading and firing with the utmost rapidity, until not a red-skin could be seen save those who were already dead.

"Go," commanded the Scalp King, as he busied himself in tearing away the scalps and throwing them in a pile on the ruined altar. "Go, before they have time to rally and cut you off."

"And you, my old friend?"

"Will follow the hell-hounds to the death."

"At least you will return part way home with us."

It required an immense amount of persuasion to get him to do so, but at length they succeeded. The rescued girl was lifted and her bonds cut away, and as she was blushing led along, she thanked Roger Bennett for his assistance—for her life, and questioned him about his escape on the previous night.

"It was a woman's knife that cut the bonds away—a squaw at that—and henceforward all of her sex and all children are safe from my vengeance. Yes, so I promised the young squaw called the 'Northern Light,' and I will keep my word. But here we part. That is your road. This way lies mine."

They clung to him—did all that was possible for man and woman to do to tempt him to go with them to civilization, but in vain. He wrung the hand of Oliver, drew the girl to him and called her "Agnes," kissed her as a father might have done a favorite daughter, and then gave a shrill whistle.

From out of the tall, dense grass of a slough his matchless horse came bounding. He flung himself upon his back, and, without looking again at any of the almost weeping group, dashed furiously away in the direction of the Indian village.

It was the last time Guy Oliver and his beautiful Kate ever saw him—but once.

CHAPTER XVI.

OVER THE PRECIPICE.

LIKE a thing accursed, Roger Bennett continued to roam through the prairies and woodlands from that day. Some haunting devil seemed ever driving him on. He could scarcely be said to have a local habitation.

The Indians watched him as well as they could, but he came upon them so suddenly and without warning, that they never were safe. Yet they soon learned that their women and children were no longer in danger, though no one but she who had obtained the pledge from him as a reward for release from the most imminent danger could have explained the mystery—and she was dumb.

But it became a fancy with the warriors and the elders of the tribe that, as the cavern in the mountain appeared to be his favorite haunt, if they could destroy it he might be tempted to leave that part of the country, and carry on his work of destruction in some other quarter. Filled with this idea, they watched about it upon all occasions when they believed they could do so with any safety, and at length fortune appeared to be changing in their favor.

The riddle as to how he could so suddenly appear from the cave upon the very top of the mount was solved.

The fall season of storms had been of the most terrific violence, and one day, when a spy had been crawling very near and stood upon the identical spot where the fierce battle between the Scalp King and there war-chief had been fought, he noticed that a great tree had been blown down. Curiosity led him to examine it, and he found it hollow, and that there was an opening beneath—penetrated it and stood in the home of the Scalp King!

Now they had certainly found the means to conquer him, for, while one party was engaged in his attention in front, another could steal upon him from behind, and either shoot him down like a dog or rush upon and bind him beyond the possibility of escape.

But first, he must be caught at home. The game could not be killed or taken until within the trap,

and they were forced to exercise patience for yet a little time. Yet at last their hour came, for, like

"The wolf's long gallop that can tire
The hound's deep hate and hunter's fire,"

they trailed him for days, weeks, even months, and though more than one scalp had been lost, yet they never gave up—never became discouraged, and when (by the aid of the first snow) they tracked him to his rocky lair, they felt as if they were rewarded—as if the prize was already within their grasp, and that night it was high carnival in the comfortless homes of the red-man.

And while they were discussing, had decided upon and were making merry over his fate, he lay dreaming within the rocky cave, lost to all of earth, lost to all of danger; dreaming sweet dreams, until a light touch was upon his shoulder, and he sprung up to deal instant death around, and saw to his astonishment that a beautiful Indian girl was kneeling at his feet.

"You here!" He could not believe the evidence of his own eyesight.

"The wolves are abroad upon the trail, and will hunt the stag of many antlers to his lair and kill him even before he can strike a blow."

"How do you know this?"

"Even now the warriors are laughing over their plans."

"But how will they get here unnoticed?"

"As I did!"

"By Heaven! I had not thought of that."

"I came through the hollow where the great tree once stood. It is blown down, and the spies of the red-men have found the trail."

He dashed away from her, crawled to the top of the mountain, saw that her words were true and then returned, seated himself, and, taking her hand within his own, asked:

"Why did you come to tell me this? You belong to the tribe of my enemies."

"Because," and she bowed her head into her lap in confusion, and whispered so that he could scarcely catch the words, "because I love you."

"Love me!"

"When the child of the red-man came to bask the pale warrior she sought to master him with her eyes—and his were the stronger. Had she been successful then he would have sung his last song, for there was evil in her thoughts. Now she is a slave to him. Her heart is at his feet. If he tramples upon it she will die! If he smiles upon her she will save him."

Whatever might have been his feelings he saw plainly that she was in earnest—that there was no deceit, and the wisdom of binding her still more strongly to him. And perchance her uncommon beauty and loveliness awoke a throb of pity within his breast, and he treated her with tenderness and listened to the story she had to tell, making up his mind at the same time what it was necessary for her to do.

"I thank you," he said, as he drew her still more closely to him, "and my heart opens to let you in. Go now. The red warriors will not find me sleeping. But they must know nothing of your coming here or it would go hard with you and I should mourn."

"The pale-face would drive me from him," she said, sorrowfully.

"No—not so. I am in great danger, and would only have you in safety. When the red warriors are baffled she can come again and—"

"Go with him toward the land of the setting sun?"

"Yes—yes."

He did not think what he was promising, and how deeply the words would sink into her heart—become as life to her. But with their utterance she sprung toward him, twined her arms around his neck, kissed him, and then bowed her head, and slowly retreated by the same passage that she had come.

Satisfied that he was safe from any attack in front, the Scalp King gave it no thought, and turned his attention to the passage from above. But a few moments of reflection convinced him that if it was in any way disturbed it would be instantly noticed, and removing the rock that concealed the entrance to the other secret passage, he led his horse downward and stabled him beyond the reach of harm. Then he returned and made his preparations to give his enemies a hot welcome. These were concluded, and hours passed before he was disturbed. Indeed, he had begun to believe that the warning of the Indian girl had been premature, when his quick ear caught an unnatural sound, and he knew that his enemies were stealing upon him from both before and behind—that they had entirely cut him off from escape, so far as they had any knowledge.

Drawing back into the shadow he watched for their coming, believing that a few would venture down the path from above, rush to the bridge, lower it, and gain the other passage. But in this he was sadly mistaken. They were too crafty to thus expose any of their number after the terrible warnings that had been previously given—had well matured their plans, and made a feint of attacking from the rear while they in reality intended to do so from in front by a forcible charge.

This was soon proved.

The Indians had brought with them light bridges (made something after the manner of their snowshoes) and numbers were thrown across at the same moment and the armed warriors sprung upon them and gained a footing upon the opposite side. Then they paused and shouted the wild cry of battle, and the Scalp King could hear others coming to meet them from above, and saw that he would be between two fires.

For a single moment he thought of remaining and fighting it out to the last—of trying to cut a way to liberty through a force that well might make the

stoutest heart quail. But he instantly saw the folly of such a proceeding, and he disappeared within the secret pathway.

The Indians rushed in from either entrance, and mistaking each other in the darkness, many a blow was struck, and several of them were sacrificed to their fury before the fact was ascertained. Then, with hideous groans they sprung wildly about in search of him who had thus outwitted them, and fairly tore their hair and gnashed their teeth with rage as they saw him standing upon the opposite side of the gulf—saw that his own bridge, as well as those that had been brought with them, had been removed, and that the trap they had prepared for him had been sprung upon them.

No, there was still another mode of exit. True, it was small, but they could crawl out one at a time and reach the upper air, and they hastily made the attempt. It was useless. Somebody had been before them; huge rocks had been tumbled down, and were far too heavy for them to move, even had they not been closely jammed together.

With groans of despair they sunk back, and gathering in a group, drew their blankets over their heads and began singing their death-song, while the mocking laughter of their enemy rung in their ears, and his rifle sent to death any who exposed themselves in the slightest degree.

There was nothing left them but to die! They would not have believed that even the Manitou would have had power to extricate them from their perilous position—that anything could have saved them from the horrid, lingering death of starvation!

But the Scalp King had somewhat overcalculated the strength of his own position. He foolishly believed that none would be left (or would dare) to attack him, and, seated so as to command a view of the opening to the cavern, he gave no heed to anything else. It was to him the most perfect and satisfactory hour he had ever had of vengeance—was like a draught of cool water to a man dying of thirst—food to the poor wretch in the gasps of starvation. To everything else he was deaf and blind.

Yet there were others who also had dreams of vengeance, and dark forms were coming up the mountain-side—stealing along like shadows, and without the slightest warning, half a dozen warriors sprung upon and attempted to crush him down to the earth, while the outcries gave to their imprisoned companions the hope of speedy relief.

The struggle was a wild and fearful one. Although taken at a great disadvantage, the Scalp King gained his feet, and tearing away the grasp of one that had been fastened with bull-dog tenacity upon his throat, he hurled him bodily into the abyss below, and his shrieks would have been sweet music to his ears had he but the time to listen.

Another was disposed of in the same manner, and a third fell bleeding and helpless from the deeply-driven blows of his knife. But there yet remained three, and his strength was giving way before their united assaults. Like wolves they endeavored to pull him down—were fastened upon neck, arms and limbs, and a giant could not long have withstood their united force.

On the opposite side their brothers raged like fiends that they could be of no assistance—were forced to look on without the power to strike a single blow, and could do nothing but encourage with their shouts. Yet it appeared as if even this were no longer needed. The Scalp King was rapidly failing. Blood was crimsoning his lips, forced as it would seem from his heart by his superhuman exertions; his eyes were starting from their sockets; his limbs trembling like one with the ague; his breath coming from between the purple lips as blasts from a furnace, and his cry of defiance was growing very faint. One combined effort more, and he would be helplessly at their mercy.

For a single instant he had torn himself free; had put a little space between them. They rushed upon him again, but he sprung aside, and they were hurled together, and fell interlocked; and before they could recover themselves, he had darted away. But not toward the foot of the mountain. There were too many to intercept him, and, with the exertion of all his remaining strength, he climbed upward and stood upon the topmost ledge.

The bridge was hastily thrown over, and the warriors, released from their imprisonment in the cave, dashed in pursuit. They were strong-limbed men, unwearied, and with every possible incentive to revenge. And not long were they in finding and following the path he had taken—not long in reaching the bald rock. His position was now as the deer whom the wolves would drive over a precipice—death before and death behind.

It was a terrible situation for mortal man to be placed in, and yet there was no shadow of fear upon the face of the Scalp King. He was breathing for some desperate effort—stood braced—with his feet resting upon the outermost verge of the rocks; that rose an almost perpendicular pile for a thousand feet. The dark circle closed steadily around him, with fire flashing from their eyes and black revenge boiling in their hearts.

But not a sound escaped any lip. All realized by how brittle a thread hung the life of their enemy, and they almost trembled for fear some incautious movement should hurl him down—down—to utter destruction—to be crushed beyond the power of recognition—not to leave enough for them to fatten their revenge upon!

He heard their coming, turned round, confronted them, and never had he appeared so utterly reckless—never so confident in his own powers.

"You think, blood-loving wolves!" he hissed from lips of scorn, "that I will permit you to take me. Is there any two of you bold enough to come and try the venture? Aha! Cowards that you are, you

shrink back from even the sound of my voice, and how much more would ye do so from my arm. Come on! I spit at and defy you, miserable, yelping, treacherous dogs!"

They crowded still closer! Knowing that he was weaponless they ventured. Had his rifle been in his hands it might have been possible for him to have kept them in check for yet a little time. Now the tiny dove in the crushing folds of the serpent was not more helpless! Yet still he defied and taunted them with cowardice and baseness—laughed triumphantly at the number of scalps he had taken, and appeared to glory that death for him was so very near.

They crept still nearer! When he had ceased speaking the silence became so intense that each could hear the breathing of his own heart. Yet he remained confronting them—keeping his eyes fixed upon every movement—looking as if he intended to spring upon the first who came sufficiently near, grapple with him, and both go over the fearful brink together!

Still more nearly they closed around! Already they had crouched to spring—already the word was being passed along the line, when they were startled by a scream so terrific as to cause them even for a moment to forget their revenge; and when they looked again they saw with a shudder that the Scalp King was in the act of leaping from the precipice. Saw him disappear, and rushed with shouts of disappointment to the bottom, to wreak what little malice they could on his mangled form!

CHAPTER XVII.

THE SQUAW BRIDE.

THE Indians searched in vain for the body of the Scalp King at the foot of the cliff. But far above them they saw something hanging in a tree-top, whose gnarled roots were twined around and found scanty life amid the crevices of the rocks, and believed he had been caught while descending, and would forever remain suspended between heaven and earth.

But they were again mistaken. The brow of the precipice was as familiar to him as the cave where he had dwelt so long, and when the screams of the Indian girl at his terrible situation had caused a momentary diversion in his favor, he swung himself down to a ledge below, where he obtained but an insecure foothold, and creeping along gained a comparatively safe spot, and with a smile stripped off his hunting-shirt and hurled it downward. It lodged in a tree-top, and completely deceived the Indians, and as soon as they departed, he was at liberty to gain a better resting-place.

This was a work of time and difficulty—was very slow in being accomplished, but, after hours of labor, he again had climbed to the top, descended upon the other side, was resting and calculating upon his future career.

Then he saw a sight that caused more of fear than had even his own perilous situation but a brief time previously—caused his blood to chill—to almost freeze within his veins, and his heart to suddenly cease its pulsation—his cheeks to blanch and his hand to tremble, even though clinched.

The beautiful young squaw who had so strangely become attached to him by the subtle power of magnetism, psychology, call it by what name you please, was in the hands of the infuriated tribe; was bound to the stake and evidently destined for torture. That they had gained a knowledge of her attachment to him was certain, and equally evident was it to him that her moments of life already were numbered.

A stake had been driven at but a little distance from the foot of the mountain, upon an open space, and all the elements of torture were being gathered with the utmost alacrity. It was joyous work for willing hands, which even the women and children took part in. There was not to be even the mockery of a trial. She was prejudged! caught perhaps in the act and already doomed.

With a strange feeling about his heart, the white man saw the fagots being carried forward to consume her beautiful limbs; to roast the very heart that had been beating so kindly for him in defiance of natural love for her race; that had three times been his shield from a horrible death. It might not have been love, but certainly something very near akin to it took possession of him, and his teeth were set and his breath drawn hard.

With the rapid and keen glances of an eagle, he drank in all that was passing, and almost coolly calculated how much longer it would be before the poor girl would be wrapped in a shroud of flame. Then he drew back and altogether disappeared.

To make the spectacle the more to be remembered, the offending girl was stripped to the waist, and many hands were busy sharpening splinters to stick into the soft skin that was already quivering with fear. These she knew would ignite with a breath, and though they burned furiously, would expire after leaving great blisters, but without doing any thing to lessen the chances of life. Then the wood was piled cunningly around so as to produce the most intense heat without becoming dangerous; to produce the most acute pain without depriving her of sensibility, and so, also, that the wind would blow the smoke away without leaving a chance for suffocation. In fact, every thing was prepared in the most artistic method of doubly-refined savage torture, and yet the demons lingered before applying the match, to make her feel to the full what was coming, and even proffered life—upon one condition.

"What is it?" she gasped, for who would not have been anxious to escape from such a doom?

"You know the secrets of the den of the accursed pale-face?" was asserted rather than asked.

"Some of them."

"You know how he can appear and disappear without being seen."

"Even as does the mole, by working under ground."

"Tell us of them, and your life shall be spared, even though you will be driven from the tribe."

Would she reveal? The temptation was as terrible a one as could by any possibility come to a young heart, and no one could have blamed her had she done so. And very few would have hesitated for even a single instant when life was standing upon the one hand, and that which causes the heart to shudder and grow sick, even at the thought, upon the other.

Yes, the trial was a terrible one, and the poor girl bowed her head as low upon her breast as her bonds would permit, and tears started into her eyes. But as if unworthy of her lineage, she shook them off—quelled the involuntary trembling of her lip—forced her heart to still something of its wild beatings and the blood that was coursing through her veins with a spring-time flood to flow more tranquilly, and answered in a tone that thrilled through the frame of every young warrior who was within the sound of her voice:

"The Northern Light can not tell any more than the warriors of the red-men have found out."

"It is false as the Manitou of the pale-face!"

"She did not say that she did not know but that she could not tell."

"She loves the pale-face!"

"Ay, love binds her tongue."

A hundred hands were raised and would have done her injury had not the chief sternly forbidden her being injured. But, this was not done on account of any pity for—simply in his anxiety to gain the knowledge he so longed for. That accomplished, and though he would have cut her bonds and proclaimed her free, yet he would have taken good care that she would not have traveled far before her death was compassed by other means.

Drawing nearer to her he whispered the most alluring offers that were in his power—tempted by promises that would have driven her wild with delight before the advent of or rather her love for the pale-face—promised to make her rich in robes, blankets, horses, wampum—to give her the choice of the young braves for her husband—to even make her his own wife! But she steadily turned a deaf ear to all, and murmured, sadly:

"She will die."

"And the miserable dog of a pale-face shall not escape even though you throw away your own life."

"He has never attempted to do so!" she replied proudly. "Had he kept his scalps he could have covered many a wigwam with them. Look around and see how his arm has thinned the ranks of your warriors," she continued with enthusiasm, for if she must die it was glory for her to do so for so great a warrior. "Has any man of red blood ever equaled it?"

"Silence!"

"I will not be silent! With my last breath I will sing his name."

"Let her tongue be torn out!" shouted the enraged braves.

"Then she will try and tell of his glory with her lips."

"Let the pile be fired and her accursed body be burned. She is a disgrace to the tribe and her people would forget that such ever lived."

"One moment," she exclaimed, raising both her head and voice. "You would know of the secret paths of the Scalp King. Yonder is one—look!"

The stone side of the mountain appeared to have crumbled away. An unknown opening yawned before their eyes. Then from out the darkness sprang the majestic black horse and his rider—black and terrible as a thunder-cloud that is riven by the lightning, and with wondrous bounds cleared the intervening space between him and the prisoner, cut her loose, raised her before him, and, driving his spurs rowel deep, drove madly onward!

The movement was so sudden—so unexpected that all had given way. But, when they saw it was not a spirit with eyes of fire and breath of flame, but simply the well known steed and his matchless rider, their feelings found tongue; the rocks rung with their wild yells; the sun was almost darkened by their arrows, and the fugitives might as well have passed through a whirlwind of flint and steel.

Although his movements were somewhat impeded by the half-fainting girl that clung around his neck, yet he endeavored to shield her as much as was possible and continue his flight, which, though rapid at first, was momentarily growing slower, for through such a storm no mortal horse could ever have passed unscathed. And both of the riders were wounded, both bleeding, and the face of the girl that was upturned to the man for whom she had given up home, country, tongue and people, told of intense suffering.

Then again the nobleness of the brave girl was revealed. She pleaded that he would leave her to her fate, or rather that he would with his own hands put an end to her life and seek his own safety.

"The horse is tired with his double weight," she said. "He is wounded. But if not overloaded would even yet break through and carry the pale-face beyond the reach of the red-man."

"He must do so now!" was the decided reply.

"He will not—can not! Let the pale chief listen. For the love which he bears the child of the red-man, let him kill her!"

"Not until I see that all hope is lost. Then I will strangle you and dash out my own brains! I have sworn never to be taken while life is left."

The ranks of the enemy were closing around them, but the most had passed beyond, and he saw that

the most desperate battle would have to be fought in the direction which he now had determined to take. With a few whispered words to the girl, he wheeled his horse and dashed back toward the rocks. But the noble horse had almost outrun his strength; his speed momentarily slackened—must soon be nothing better than a walk—and then? The brain of the Scalp King fairly whirled as he thought of it, and made the most desperate efforts to reach the shelter of the rocks.

Too late, alas! too late! Like buzzards to a feast of blood the Indians were closing around him—were almost within reach. Already a few had gained his side, but the whirling battle-ax that brought instant death still kept them somewhat in check.

Too late—alas! too late for help. The rocks were very near—they could see into the opening that was life to them; but at that precious moment the faithful steed stumbled, reeled, fell and threw them heavily to the earth. But in an instant both were upon their feet.

"Turn now and run for life!" he cried, as, seizing the girl's hand, the Scalp King made such a mighty burst of speed as has rarely, if ever been equaled; and, even as the red warriors were almost about to lay their hands upon him, fell exhausted in the mouth of the little opening in the rocks!

Instantly dragged back by the girl, he was beyond the reach of their weapons, and when they crawled near, he raised up painfully, whispered a few words; she assisted him to gain his feet—to press upon a lever, and down thundered between them and their baffled enemies piles of loosened rocks!

No, they were not yet baffled. The Indians knew that they would retreat to the cave, and followed them by every possible path—saw them standing leaning upon each other—crowded around, into the cavern, and then—?

There was a sound as of the most terrific thunder—the upheaving as of an earthquake—the mounting of flame as from a volcano—the body of the cavern was blown out by the mighty explosion—the air was filled with fragments of human bodies, and then all was silence, and blackness, and ruin.

With his latest act the Scalp King had fearfully remembered and kept his oath. He was never more seen or heard of by the red-men, though his history is even yet told in whispers by the old men of the tribe to their wondering and shuddering children. From amid them he passed, as they believed, in the whirlwind of flame and smoke that caused the death of so many of their number—was believed to be buried, with his dusky-skinned love, in the ruins.

Such was the tale that spread over the border like a prairie fire, and even Guy Oliver and his fair young bride would have believed it and mourned for him had not the young physician accidentally discovered the form of Roger Bennett lying dead upon the spot where his wife and children had years before been buried.

Their bones are now common dust. But of the beautiful and brave Indian girl there is nothing left but a memory—as soon will come to all her race.

THE END.

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